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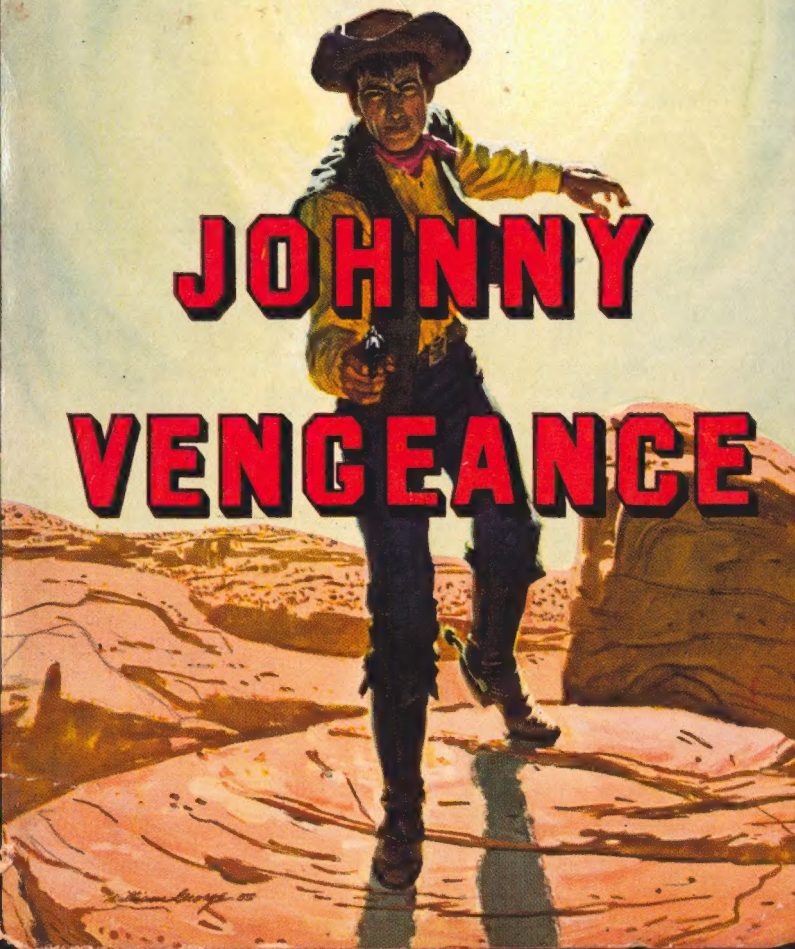
A BANTAM WESTERN 25¢

FRANK GRUBER

Nothing could stop him. He meant to track down and kill four men. That's why they called him



JOHNNY VENGEANCE

It wasn't his real name—

He was christened Johnny Welker, and he never touched a gun till he was fifteen years old. He helped his father run the ferry across desolate Salt River. He cut wood and lugged water for his mother.

He was in the brush the day the four hardcases rode up. He came running when he heard the first shot—running right into a bullet.

When he opened his eyes he was the only one alive at the ferry.

It took a couple of years, and then he was still a kid but quicker with a six-gun than a rattlesnake with venom.

That's when he started after the four killers—patiently, tracking them one by one.

That's when he got his new name—

JOHNNY VENGEANCE

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By
Frank Gruber

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JOHNNY VENGEANCE

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Johnny Vengeance

1

There were four of the hardcases, but they had only three horses among them, so two were compelled to ride double. All were whiskered and incredibly dirty. One of them wore a faded, torn Union cavalryman's blouse and a second wore trousers that had once been Confederate gray, but were now just filthy. All carried revolvers and the cleanest of the four —which was not saying much—had a repeating Winchester rifle.

They rode up to the ferry and dismounted. They studied the swollen river and talked among themselves in low tones, looking now and then at the ferryman, John Welker, who was aboard the ferryboat, fashioning a new sweep from a long length of ash.

Welker was aware of their presence, but paid no attention to them, until the rifleman stepped up to the water's edge and called to him. "How much to take us across?"

Welker surveyed the group. "Twenty-five cents apiece and fifty cents for each of the horses."

"That's a lot of money," complained the rifleman. "That river ain't more'n a hundred feet across."

"That's right," admitted Welker. "And I don't own the river. You've a perfect right to swim it."

"Nobody could swim that torrent," exclaimed one of the men angrily.

"Oh, it'll go down some," said Welker. "Along about midsummer you can ride your horse across and hardly get your ankles wet."

The four men on the bank got together again and argued among themselves. Then their spokesman stepped out. "We'll pay it."

Welker nodded and stepped to the railing of the boat, which was a mere flat-bottomed scow. He held out his hand. "In advance."

The rifleman exclaimed in sudden anger, "Don't you trust us?"

"No," was the reply.

"All right," snapped the rifleman, "here's your money!"

He thrust his rifle at the ferryman and pulled the trigger.

The force of the bullet turned Welker completely about before he pitched to the deck of the boat. The man with the rifle sprang forward and clambered aboard. He looked down briefly at the ferryman, then turned and signaled to his followers. "Let's get across!"

His eyes went past the men on the bank to the log cabin that stood some fifty feet from the shore. A woman was coming out of the cabin, a young woman in her early thirties. A shotgun was in her hands and her eyes blazed as she came running forward.

"You dirty murderers!" she cried. "You filthy scum!"

She stopped and whipped up the shotgun. The ruffians scattered, yelling and cursing. The shotgun boomed and fine shot scattered among the men, stinging a couple of them, but doing no serious damage. Then one of the ruffians sprang toward the woman and wrenched the shotgun from her hands. A second man grabbed her and wrestled her to the ground. The remaining hardcases crowded forward, jeering and making ribald remarks.

Suddenly, the rifleman held up his hand. Pounding feet sounded in the near-by underbrush, and the ruffians became alert. A boy of not more than fourteen, wearing patched Levis and a hickory shirt, bounded into the clearing. He skidded to a halt, his eyes wide in shock as they saw the woman pinned to the ground by one of the men. Then a scream was torn from his throat and he leaped forward.

He was able to take no more than two or three steps. The rifleman coolly threw down on him and fired. The boy broke in his stride and pitched to the ground.

The rifleman walked up to the fallen boy and turned him over with his foot. Satisfied that a second shot was not necessary, he walked back to the others.

He looked down at the woman. She had ceased resistance, and the man who had wrestled her to the ground got cautiously to his feet.

The rifleman said, "We can't leave her to tell about us." He lowered the muzzle of his rifle, hesitated, then pulled the trigger.

Young Johnny Welker lay on the ground, thirty feet away. He was conscious and he heard.

2

Johnny Welker lay on the ground long after the four men boarded the ferryboat and shoved off for the opposite side. The bullet from the Winchester had struck him high on the right side of his chest and had gone clear through. Johnny never quite lost consciousness, but for long minutes at a time, a haze enveloped his brain. Then it would clear and he would try to move—and could not. He lost a vast quantity of blood, but the fact that he was unable to move probably saved his life. The blood coagulated after a time.

How long he remained motionless Johnny did not know. It had been, possibly, midafternoon when the four men came down to the ferry, and the shadows were long when at last he was able to pull himself up to his hands and knees.

He remained in that position for moments, staring at the motionless form of his mother. With great effort he made a half turn and looked toward the water's edge. The ferryboat, of course, was gone, but where was the body of his father?

A vertigo swept over young Johnny and he was forced to rest his head upon the ground once more. When he was able to raise it again, the sun had dipped below the western horizon.

He moved one hand a few inches forward, brought up the other; moved one knee ahead and forced the other up beside it. He stopped for a moment or two and then repeated the procedure. In ten minutes he reached his mother's side.

And then, at last, a sob was torn from his throat and he fell forward across his mother's form. The sobs wracked his body and started his wound to bleeding again, and he lay for long, long minutes unable to move.

The sobs quieted and he forced himself to his knees. He repeated the crawling process, moving inches at a time and with frequent stops. It was a long time before he reached the door of the cabin. It was pitch-dark inside, but it was a small cabin and months of residence in it had familiarized Johnny with the location of every object in the place.

His bunk was on the left, across the room from the built-in bed of his father and mother. It was to the larger bed that he

crawled. When he reached it, he used the frame of the bed to pull himself up to his feet. Gripping the bed with one hand he peeled back the blankets and caught hold of the sheet underneath. Pulling it up he put one end between his teeth and ripped off a strip of the soft cloth. But then he found that he could not remove his shirt and with his free hand tore it from his shoulders. Carefully, gasping from pain and weakness, he twisted the bandage about his chest, pulling it tight. Finally he reached the end of the sheet and pulled it so tight that he cried out from the pain and fell onto the bed.

He slept. . . .

The sun in his eyes awakened Johnny Welker. For a moment he stared stupidly at the ceiling above him, then realization swept over him and a cry was torn from his throat. Dizziness threatened to envelop him and he fought to overcome it. Winning, he forced himself to a sitting position and finally to his feet. He took a tentative step toward the door, another. When he reached the door, he gripped the frame of it hard and looked out.

He was badly wounded, but he was alive.

There were things to do. Only—only he was too weak to do them. There was a spade behind the house, but he could never negotiate the distance to get it, much less use it.

He looked at the still form that had been his mother. Even at the distance he could see the flies that buzzed about her face, and a great pain shot through him.

He moved toward her, a step at a time and finally he stood over her. He let himself slowly down to his knees, fanned the flies away from her dead face. In spite of himself, the tears came and he knelt beside his mother for long minutes.

They were the last tears that he was ever to shed.

At last he put his hands under his mother's armpits and pulled her body an inch or two, stopped, then pulled again. . . .

An hour later his mother lay on the floor of the cabin. Piled around her was kindling wood, the homemade chairs, the table. Johnny struck a match, put it to the wood. And as the flames licked upward, he turned and went out of the cabin.

He moved so slowly that there was heat on his back before he cleared the door; when he was a dozen feet from the cabin, the flames were roaring and the wood was snapping. He took a desperate step, then another and a third, before he plunged to the ground on his face.

The cabin was a smoldering heap of embers when Hutch Thompson rode up. Thompson sat on his horse a moment.

He looked at the remains of the cabin, toward the river and finally down at the boy lying on the ground, scarcely a dozen feet from the burned cabin.

He exclaimed softly, dismounted quickly from his horse, and strode over to the boy. He stooped, placed a hand on the dirty bandage that was twisted about the boy and then gently turned him over on his back.

His eyes were open.

"What happened here?" Thompson asked.

Johnny Welker made no reply. Thompson frowned, straightened, then walked back to his horse. Rummaging about in a sack that was tied to the saddle, in lieu of saddlebags, he found a small flask. He returned to Johnny Welker, got down on both knees and slipped one hand under the boy's head, raised it a half-dozen inches, then applied the mouth of the flask to Johnny's lips. For a moment Johnny kept his mouth closed, then parted his lips a fraction of an inch. Thompson poured a few drops of whiskey between them, then tilted the flask up high.

Johnny choked and coughed.

"Sorry," said Thompson gently. He waited until Johnny stopped coughing before he poured a little more of the whiskey between his lips. Then he lowered his head to the ground.

"Can you talk?" Thompson asked.

Johnny did not reply, but after a moment his head rolled to the right and his eyes went to the remains of the cabin.

A cold shudder ran through Thompson. "Where're your folks?"

Johnny's eyes remained on the smoking embers and Thompson got up and walked to where the door of the cabin had been. An unmistakable odor assailed his nostrils and Thompson cried out in horror. He wheeled and went back to where Johnny lay on the ground.

He looked at Johnny for a long moment, then drawing a deep breath, went to his horse. He unsaddled the animal and in a few minutes had his blanket spread out on the ground and the contents of his bag emptied onto it.

He moved the boy onto the blanket. No sound escaped Johnny's lips, and Thompson realized that he had lapsed into unconsciousness, which was just as well. Thompson removed the bandage, grimaced as he examined the wound, then went to the river and got a kettle of water. He built a small fire, heated the water, and carefully washed the wound and rebandaged it.

He used the kettle to heat a thick broth, throwing in a few chunks of dried meat to strengthen it. When the broth had

cooled somewhat, he forced a spoonful between Johnny's lips. A groan came from the boy's throat, but he swallowed and when Thompson gave him the second spoonful, he opened his eyes.

Later, when Johnny again slept, Thompson got a pole and poked about the remains of the burnt cabin. Behind it, he buried the bones of Johnny's mother.

Thompson remained awake the entire night. Some of the time he sat with his back against a tree, and part of the time he paced the ground between Johnny and the river's edge.

In the morning Johnny's eyes were glazed and his pulse was faint. Thompson remained at his side most of the day. He swathed the boy's face with a wet cloth and now and then he fed him spoonsful of broth.

Johnny Welker lived.

The fever broke during the second night, and by morning Johnny's eyes were clear. He was ravenously hungry, too, eating all of the broth that Thompson fed him. An hour later he tried to sit up.

"Uh-uh," said Thompson. "Not yet."

"My father," Johnny said, the first words he had spoken.

Thompson's eyes went toward the remains of the cabin.

Johnny shook his head slightly. "No." He half raised his hand and pointed toward the river. "They—they killed him there."

"They?" Thompson's eyes narrowed.

"Four men. . . . They shot him, then they . . ." Pain came into Johnny's eyes.

Thompson hunkered down on his heels. "I think you'd better tell me the whole story."

A chill settled over Thompson as Johnny told him. When the tale was finished Thompson asked simply, "How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

Thompson nodded and rose to his full height. He looked down at Johnny. Then his eyes went to the river. "I'll be gone a little while," he said. "Get some sleep. I'll be back."

Thompson returned during the middle of the afternoon, his clothing soaked. Johnny was awake, but asked no questions. However, he saw Thompson pass again a few minutes later, carrying a spade.

Toward evening Thompson returned. The spade was caked with dried mud.

"I think you ought to know," he told Johnny gently. "I

found your father. He—he was caught in the bend, about two miles downriver. It was too far to carry him here, so I—I buried him down there—and your mother behind the cabin."

3

Hutch Thompson had a farm a few miles from the teeming city of Omaha that had grown so rapidly since the close of the war. He had a chance to sell the farm for a good price, but before doing so he had decided to travel to the West and see if he could find some good land that could be had merely for the taking. He had not yet found the land when he had come across Johnny Welker. By the time Johnny was able to travel, Thompson decided to return to the farm near Omaha and wait another season before beginning the westward move.

It was too late to put in a crop that year anyway, and he might as well harvest the crop that was already in his fields.

He returned to Omaha, walking all of the way. Johnny rode Thompson's horse.

Thompson's wife, a gaunt, work-worn woman in her early thirties, was splitting wood in front of the Thompson house when Thompson and Johnny came up.

"You're back," she said quietly.

The two Thompson children, Ethel and Linda, nine and six, dashed out of the house, squealing in delight. Thompson caught them up and it was a moment or two before he called attention to Johnny, still in the saddle.

"This is Johnny," he announced, shooting a quick look at his wife.

The two girls eyed Johnny curiously. Then the older one, Ethel, inquired tentatively, "He's going to be our hired man?"

"No," Thompson replied quickly. "He's going to live with us." He signaled to Johnny. "Light and make yourself at home."

Johnny slipped down from the saddle and quietly took the horse around to the barn. He put it in a stall, fed and watered it, then finding a brush and currycomb, worked on it until Thompson came into the barn.

"Supper's ready," Thompson said gruffly. "Better come in and eat."

"It's all right, Mr. Thompson," Johnny said. "I'm old enough to take care of myself. I—I won't bother you any more."

"Don't talk nonsense, son," said Thompson. "You're welcome to stay here; that's what I'm trying to tell you." He added quickly, "Like the girl said, we need a hired man, only I haven't been able to pay for one. You'll earn your keep, helping around."

There was a lean-to behind the house in which Mrs. Thompson made up a bed for Johnny that night, and the next day Thompson knocked together a rough bed where Johnny slept from that time on.

Johnny Welker was a willing enough worker, but Thompson permitted him to do no more than light chores, until late in August when the harvesting began. By that time Johnny seemed strong enough to do a full day's work in the fields.

Toward the end of September, when the harvest was in, Thompson hitched up his team and the entire family piled into the farm wagon. "You, too, son," he said to Johnny. "We're going to spend the day in town."

When they got into Omaha, Thompson gave Johnny fifteen dollars. "You've earned it. Spend it any way you like."

When they returned to the farm that evening, Johnny carried a small parcel. Ethel, the older girl, asked him what he'd bought in town, but Johnny shook his head. He volunteered no information to Thompson or Mrs. Thompson, but they found out soon enough what Johnny had bought with his money.

After supper, when it was still light, Johnny got his parcel and went out behind the barn. After a few minutes, Thompson, smoking his pipe in the house, was startled to hear a gun go off. He got up and went out.

Johnny was firing a second-hand Navy Colt revolver at a stump some distance from the barn. When he turned to reload it the second time, he saw Hutch Thompson standing a short distance away.

"You're aiming too far to the left," Thompson said quietly.

Johnny shook his head. "No, the gun's firing to the left."

"Mind if I try it?"

Johnny handed him the gun. Thompson took off the caps and put fresh ones on the nipples. He reloaded the chambers, then took careful aim at the stump. He fired, then walked toward the stump.

"You're right," he said. "She shoots left about four inches."

Johnny regarded him thoughtfully. "You shoot very well."

Thompson shrugged. "Three years in the Nebraska militia." He hesitated. "Your father served in the army?"

"He was a sergeant in Custer's cavalry," replied Johnny. "That—that's why we were out there at Salt River. He was captured at Yellow Tavern and was in Libby Prison until—until last April. He—he didn't care much for people." Then he added, "His arm never mended right. That's why those men—got the drop on him."

He took the gun from Thompson's hand, aimed at the stump and fired.

A frown creased Thompson's forehead.

The winter was a harsh one. For days the wind howled from the west and the north, a biting, cold wind. Then it snowed for days on end and piled up drifts that were higher than anyone in Nebraska had ever known. The farmers kept their stock in the barns and remained close to their homes. It was hard enough to take care of the livestock and keep sufficient fuel on hand for the stoves in the homes.

Daily, except for a few days when the snowdrifts were too deep, the Thompson children attended a school some two miles from the farm. Johnny Welker usually put the little girls on a single horse, bundled up in overcoats and blankets, then riding another horse, took them to school. He got them in the afternoon. Once, Hutch Thompson asked Johnny if he himself did not want to go to school. He shook his head, and the farmer did not bring up the subject again.

Johnny was in the sod-covered log house very little during the winter days. He took care of the livestock in the barns and when he was not working, he was practicing with the revolver.

The ammunition he had bought with the gun was soon gone, but that did not stop Johnny's practice. He thrust the revolver under the waistband of his trousers, then drew it quickly, cocking the hammer and snapping the trigger. He found that the front sight sometimes caught in the waistband, and he filed it smooth down to the barrel. As he acquired speed in drawing, he discovered that he lost a fraction of a second in cocking the hammer and pulling the trigger. He took the gun apart and filed down the hammer and trigger, so that only the slightest pull was necessary to cock the single-action revolver, and a mere touch of the trigger fired it.

One day in January, Hutch Thompson entered the barn and stood for some minutes watching Johnny as he drew and simulated firing. Johnny would let his hands dangle at his

sides, then make a swift reach and draw. Again, he would raise both hands to shoulder level before making the draw.

First he would half turn to the right and draw, then to the left. He stooped and drew; he crouched. He drew from every conceivable position.

At last Thompson said quietly, "Johnny!"

Johnny whirled in a flash. His hand shot for the revolver stuck under his belt. It leaped into his hand, the thumb cocking the hammer. But he did not pull the trigger.

"I know why you're doing that, Johnny," Thompson said. Then, as Johnny made no reply, "You intend to find those men someday and kill them." He shook his head. "You don't even know their names, do you?"

"No," replied Johnny, "but I saw their faces. I'll find them —somewhere. . . ."

"It's no good, Johnny," Thompson said earnestly. "You can't devote your entire life to revenge. You're not quite fifteen, but you're thinking about it all the time. I've watched you, son, sitting by the stove in the evening, your mind on it. You're thinking about it day and night, and it's not good."

"What *is* good, Mr. Thompson?"

Thompson groaned. "I can't talk to you, boy. I—I found you, remember. I know what they did to your father—your mother. It was the foulest crime any man could commit. But I'm thinking of you. You've a whole life ahead of you, and the life you're going into is *not* good."

"I can't help it, Mr. Thompson," Johnny said tonelessly.

Thompson stopped and looked at the boy, in pain. He said slowly, "I'm selling the farm in the spring. I—I want you to go with us."

He looked at Johnny, the question in his eye. But Johnny thrust the revolver under the waistband of his trousers and turning, caught up a pitchfork and went to get hay for the horses.

The next morning Johnny was gone.

4

The months on the Thompson farm had filled out Johnny Welker. They had also put an inch onto his height. He grew another inch before June, and when he rode down the slope to Salt River he was five feet eight inches tall and weighed about one hundred and thirty-five pounds. He was fifteen years old.

A brush lean-to had been built near the water's edge and a man of about forty, with huge walrus mustaches, got up as Johnny approached. Johnny's eyes were on the ferryboat that was tied to a pile driven into the ground at the water line.

"Hiyah, bub," the ferryman greeted Johnny cheerfully. "Like to cross to the other side?"

Johnny nodded. "How much?"

The man looked past Johnny. "You alone?"

"Yes."

"Mmm, you don't hardly seem old enough to be travelin' alone." The ferryman shrugged. "Cost you four bits. Fella used to have this boat woulda charged you a dollar, but seein's you're just a young squirt, I'll take you across for half price."

He climbed aboard the boat and lowered the crossbar. Johnny rode his horse onto the scow and dismounted. The man put up the bar and picked up a long sweep. He dug the sweep down into the water, to the bottom of the river, pushed mightily, but the boat did not move.

Johnny watched him strain. "You have to untie the rope," he said.

The ferryman winced. "That happens every time." He stepped to the rope and untied it. "I'm new at this."

"I know," said Johnny.

The boat veered away from the landing and was caught by the current. The ferryman worked furiously with the sweep and brought the boat under control. Then he grinned at Johnny. "This ain't the easiest job in the world."

"My father didn't mind it."

The ferryman looked sharply at Johnny. "Eh?"

Johnny gestured to the boat. "This belonged to my father."

The man gave a start. Then his eyes darted past Johnny to the landing. "Say, there's a grave back there——"

"My mother."

The ferryman exclaimed, "And you didn't even——"

Johnny looked at him steadily. "She's dead." He pointed downstream. "My father's buried down there somewhere."

"You're a strange kid," said the ferryman.

Johnny turned away from him, to his horse. He tightened the cinch and when he finished he leaned against the animal and kept his eyes on the river.

The scow reached the far side of the river, and the ferryman tied the boat to a post and raised the bar that would permit Johnny access to the shore.

"No charge," he said.

"I can pay," Johnny said sharply.

"Least I can do is give you free crossing," the ferryman said. "I guess you could rightly say the boat's yours." Then he added defensively, "Although when I come along I found her ten miles downstream, in pretty bad shape. I fixed her up and—well, I didn't have any place special to go so I just stayed on here."

"It's all right," said Johnny. "The boat's yours." He mounted his horse, but did not ride off. "Have four men ever crossed here, one of 'em wearing a Union cavalry jacket and another Rebel pants?"

The ferryman scratched his chin. "To tell you the truth, there ain't more'n two-three people come along in a week's time. As you probably know, a man ain't goin' to get rich here." He shook his head. "I've had a couple of groups of four-five people, but I can't rightly say that I took four men across in one party that might match your description." He hesitated. "They—they have anything to do with—what happened here?" He added lamely, "Your house was burned down and . . ."

Johnny's lips tightened. He shook his head and rode off the boat and down the trail, without looking back.

The ferryman looked after him a long time. Finally he exhaled heavily. "Be damned!" he muttered aloud.

For a mile or two after crossing Salt River, the trail was a fairly defined one, but then it split, one fork leading to the west and the other to the north and west. The one to the west, although it was not much of a trail, was the more traveled. The northward trail was only a faint marking, receiving but occasional travel. Johnny followed it.

He rode for two or three hours, then pulled up. He un-

saddled his horse and hobbled it so that it could graze during the night, but would not stray too far. He unrolled his saddle blanket, exposing its meager contents: a small sack of food, a frying pan and a coffeepot. And the Navy Colt revolver.

Since it was a dry camp, without water for making coffee, Johnny ate a few strips of dried meat. When he finished, he caught up the revolver, emptied the loads and then for an hour performed his daily ritual. He thrust the gun under the waistband of his trousers, let his hands dangle at his sides, then suddenly drew the revolver, cocking the hammer automatically. He spent fifteen or twenty minutes just drawing and cocking the hammer, then another ten or fifteen minutes drawing, cocking and pulling the trigger without aiming.

Finally he went a step further—drawing, cocking, snapping at objects, a bush, a rock, his horse, imaginary objects in front of him, on the right, on the left, in the rear. He drew, whirled and pulled the trigger.

There were men on the frontier who would have watched his speed and precision with awe, but no expression ever crossed Johnny's features. This was a chore with him. He performed it because he had made up his mind that the ability to draw a gun and fire it faster than any other human was necessary to his ultimate goal.

He had the time for the practice and he had the will for it.

Darkness fell upon the prairie and Johnny was still practicing. Finally, when he judged that he had practiced his full hour, he reloaded the gun and laid it on his blanket. He sat down beside it and after a few minutes, stretched himself out. But he was up again instantly, looking to the north and west.

Was that a light?

He peered into the night, then got to his feet. He looked around, located his hobbled horse and walked to it. Climbing on its back, he stood up and looked again to the north and west.

Nodding, then, he got down to the ground and walked quickly back to his blanket. He wrapped up his few belongings, leaving the gun out. He examined it as well as he could in the dark, then thrust it under the waistband of his trousers.

Finally, he saddled his horse, strapped the blanket roll behind the saddle and mounted. He rode the horse at an easy lope, and the faint light ahead steadied. In a few minutes more the light became two, and Johnny could make out a cluster of buildings. One was a fairly large one, the other a long low shed.

He slackened the pace of his mount and studied the buildings. The largest seemed to be a combination store and tavern; the long shed, a blacksmith shop.

He pulled up in front of a hitchrail outside the larger building, looked at it a moment, then dismounted. He tied his horse, ducked under the hitchrail and approached the door of the tavern-store. With his hand on the knob he hesitated, then drawing a deep breath, entered the store.

A whiskered, one-eyed man was behind the counter of the store section, weighing out some sugar. Another man stood at a short bar, and two others were playing cards at a table.

Johnny closed the door and stood with his back against it, until the storekeeper looked at him and grunted, "Kinda far from home, ain't you, younker?"

The two card players sized up Johnny and continued with their game. The man at the bar did not bother to turn around.

Johnny advanced to the counter. "I'd like to buy some bacon," he said to the one-eyed storekeeper, "and a little coffee, if you've got some."

"I've got it, sonny, if you've got the money."

"How much is it?"

"Depends on how much you want?"

Johnny reached into his pocket and brought out three silver dollars. He laid them on the counter and the storekeeper scooped them up. He got a half side of moldy bacon and a small paper sack containing about a half pound of coffee.

"That costs three dollars?" Johnny asked.

"Whaddya expect for three dollars?" snapped the storekeeper. "A couple of sides of bacon and two-three pounds of coffee?"

"That bacon has mold on it."

"Mold never hurt no one." The one-eyed man banged the bacon on the counter. "Take it or leave it. This ain't Omaha, you know. Costs money to freight stuff out here." He suddenly looked suspiciously at Johnny. "Say, ain't you the kid whose father used to run the ferry down 'cross Salt River?"

"You knew my father?"

"I paid him to cross the river a couple of times." Then he added triumphantly, "And *he* charged me enough."

Johnny gestured toward the food. "All right, I'll take it."

The storekeeper wrapped the bacon in a piece of old newspaper. Then he caught the eye of the man at the bar, who had half turned. He winked his one eye. "Maybe you'd like a little snifter of whiskey, on the house."

Johnny shook his head. "No." He picked up his purchases. "Something you could do, though—answer some questions.

Four men came through here about a year ago—four men riding three horses."

The one eye fixed on Johnny. "Yeah?"

"I'm asking you if you saw them. One of the men wore a Union cavalry jacket and another had gray Confederate pants. Did you see them?"

The storekeeper grunted. "Why?"

"I'm looking for them."

The storekeeper's eye went to the men playing cards, then shifted to the man at the bar, who was now paying attention to Johnny Welker.

"Why would you be looking for someone who passed a year ago?" the storekeeper asked bluntly. "Mind you, I didn't say I saw them."

Johnny put his parcels carefully on the counter before him. "*Did* you see them?"

"I asked you why you want to know?"

"Because they killed my father."

The storekeeper gave a start. His eye darted to the man at the bar. Then he whistled. "So that's what happened to your pa! I was wonderin'. All of a sudden his shack was burned down and the boat was gone." He looked sharply at Johnny. "You saw them shoot your pa?"

"Yes."

The man at the bar put down his empty whiskey glass and came forward. "What happened to your ma?" Johnny's eyes turned to him. "Saw her once or twice. A handsome woman."

"She's dead!" Johnny said tautly.

The card players were now looking at the group by the store counter. The one-eyed storekeeper's tongue flicked across his lips to moisten them. "They—they didn't do nothin' —to her?"

Johnny's eyes met his and a little shiver ran through the one-eyed man. The youth before him was not more than fifteen, but his eyes were—cold!

The storekeeper said, "I thought there was something wrong about that crew."

The other man snarled, "Shut your trap, Zeke!"

A frown creased the storekeeper's face. "Now, look here, Haskins——"

The other man banged his fist on the counter. "I won't take it kindly, you go blabbin'."

One of the card players kicked back his chair. He took a quick stride forward. "I don't take *your* talk kindly, Haskins. Just because one of those dirty cutthroats was your cousin——"

"What was his name?" Johnny cried.

"Same as his," snapped the card player. "Haskins."

The man named Haskins glowered at the card player. "I ain't a-goin' to forget this."

"I don't give a damn if you do or not," the card player retorted. "Anybody who'd stick up for a snake like Ben Haskins, relation or not, is no friend of mine."

"That goes for me," called out the second card player.

Haskins appealed to the storekeeper. "Which side are you on?"

The one-eyed man looked past Haskins at the two card players. He swallowed hard. "I knowed John Welker and his missus. They were good people."

"Where is he?" demanded Johnny Welker. "This cousin, Ben Haskins?"

The first card player shook his head. "I don't know. They only stopped here overnight. They acted like they was on the dodge at the time."

"That's a lie!" snarled Haskins.

The second card player came over. "Wait a minute, I remember somethin' now. They mentioned the railroad—they either worked on it, or they said they were goin' to get jobs laying track."

"Yeah," said the first card player. "That was the fella with the rifle said that."

"What was his name?" Johnny asked tightly.

"He didn't give it. Come to think of it, none of them gave their names. Except his cousin," nodding to Haskins.

In his intensity Johnny flailed out, grabbed Haskins' arm. "Their names?" he cried.

Angrily, Haskins knocked Johnny's hand aside. "Don't you touch me, you young cub." Then he followed through and smashed Johnny in the face with his fist.

It was a hard blow and Johnny reeled back. Haskins, snarling savagely now that his anger had exploded, hit Johnny a terrific blow on the side of his head that knocked the boy against the counter. As he caromed back, Haskins caught him again with his right, a crushing blow that dropped Johnny to his knees.

"I'll teach you a lesson, you——" mouthed Haskins.

He drew back his foot to kick Johnny. The first card player cried out and lunged forward. He wasn't in time to save Johnny entirely, but he knocked Haskins off balance so that his foot only grazed the side of Johnny's head. But the boot drew blood.

The second card player was beside his friend now. A gun

was in his fist, and he jammed it into Haskins' back. "That's enough, Haskins!" he cried.

Haskins froze. His hands unclenched and he raised them slowly. "You wouldn't shoot a man in the back," he whined.

"You're as bad as your cousin," snarled the card player. "Killing you would be the best thing I could do." But he stepped back and signaled to his friend, who moved forward and stooped over Johnny, still on his knees. "You hurt bad, lad?"

He reached down to give Johnny a helping hand, but the boy pushed the hand aside and got to his feet. He was weak from pain, but his eyes were as icy as before.

He made a brushing gesture as if to wipe away a haze, then his eyes focused on Haskins. "Draw!" he whispered.

Haskins' mouth fell open in astonishment. "What?" he gasped.

"Draw!" Johnny repeated.

The hint of fear came into Haskins' eyes. His mouth twitched and saliva ran out of the left side, down over his chin. "You're darin' *me?*"

The man beside Johnny wheeled and grabbed his right arm. "Don't carry this too far, kid!"

Johnny tried to shake off the man's grip, but the fingers closed tightly on his arm.

"Let me go!" cried Johnny. "Let me go and I'll kill him."

The man slapped Johnny's face. "Sorry, I had to do that, son. You don't know what you're talkin'. Not that I blame you"—shooting an angry look at Haskins—"but we just can't let a boy your age do anything like this."

The second card player stepped around Haskins. "Charley's right, boy! I'm not siding with Haskins, but you're too young for this."

"Sure," sneered Haskins. "Wipe your nose and get out of here!"

"That's enough from you," exclaimed the man with the gun. Then he turned back to Johnny and gestured with his gun. "Better clear out now, boy."

The first man still gripped Johnny's arm. He said kindly, "There's nothing more *we* can tell you, son, and Haskins won't. Better run along now before you do—before something happens for which you'll be sorry the rest of your life." He released Johnny, but his hand remained poised to grip his arm again should the boy make a sudden move.

Johnny looked into the man's eyes, saw the determination there and suddenly bobbed his head. "All right."

He whirled and strode to the door.

The four men inside the store watched him go. It wasn't until they heard the clatter of hoofs outside that Zeke, the storekeeper, exclaimed, "He forgot his bacon and coffee!"

Haskins began to swear, foul oaths.

The man with the gun turned on him. "After tonight, don't cross my path!"

"A man's got to be loyal to his kinfolk," blustered Haskins.

"Murderers aren't kinfolk," snapped the first card player. "You heard Fred; you'll get no more horseshoein' from our ranch. And if you want to do us a real favor, you'll pack up your horseshoes and stuff and go join that cousin of yours."

Haskins, denounced by the two ranchers, looked at the storekeeper.

The latter saw which way the wind was blowing. He nodded. "The boys said it for me!"

"The hell with you," snarled Haskins. "The hell with the bunch of you!"

He started for the door.

Outside, Johnny Welker was running back from where he had pulled up his horse, fifty yards from the prairie store. He was still forty feet from the door when it opened, revealing Haskins on the way out. He skidded to a stop.

"Haskins!" he called.

Flame lanced the darkness, and the explosion of Haskins' revolver blasted the stillness of the Nebraska prairie. Then Johnny's gun was in his hand, thrusting out. It belched fire and thunder.

In front of the store, Haskins cried out. He swayed, then pitched forward on his face.

Boots pounded the boards of the store and the two card players, guns in hand, burst out. Forty feet away, Johnny stood in the light that came from the open doorway. His gun was still in his hand.

"He fired first," he called softly.

One of the men touched Haskins with his foot. "He's dead!"

"He had it coming," said Johnny.

The second man took a step forward. "This is a terrible thing for a boy to do. I'm sorry—for *you*, boy!"

"Save it," said Johnny evenly. He raised his gun to call attention to it. "I'll be riding, now."

He waited a moment for an objection if there was to be one. Then, when none came, he stuck his gun back under his waistband and turning, walked steadily to where he had left his horse.

He mounted and rode into the night.

5

In Omaha, Johnny Welker had seen the bustle of activity that went with the building of a transcontinental railroad, but he had not understood it. He had seen trainloads of railroad ties, of rails, supplies and men roll out of Omaha to the west, but it had meant nothing to him.

Forty miles of track had been laid west from Omaha during 1865, but in 1866 the work was speeded up and a camp had been established at North Platte, which point the builders of the road hoped to reach before winter halted operations for the season.

Some days after he had killed Haskins at Salt River, Johnny Welker pulled up his horse on a low rise and looked thoughtfully at the shining ribbons of steel that stretched out across the horizon before him.

Off to the east a column of smoke rose in the sky. It moved closer as Johnny watched, and after a few minutes he made out that it was a train rolling westward.

He pressed his knees into his mount's belly and the animal moved forward. He was a half mile from the tracks when the train passed and he had difficulty restraining his horse from bolting, but he turned it to the right and gave it its head.

Two hours later he saw smoke to the west, and he began to make out a concentration of wagons, tents, equipment and trains. This was railhead.

It was early evening when he reached it and actual work for the day had stopped, but there was a beehive of activity as hundreds of workers swarmed about the tents.

Johnny rode up to the largest tent and saw that it was a mess tent, where a hundred or more men were eating at long tables set up under the canvas. A couple hundred more were waiting their turns to get into the tent. Johnny picked out an isolated man walking toward the tent.

"Where'll I find the man in charge?" he asked.

"In charge of what?"

Johnny gestured. "The railroad."

The man grunted. "He's in Omaha, if he ain't in his private car coming and going. The boss of construction is Mr. Davis. His tent's over that way." The man pointed to the center of the activity.

Johnny rode on until he found a tent which had a sign on it: *Harry Davis.* He dismounted and stepped to the tent opening.

There was a man inside, working at a drafting board.

"Mr. Davis?" Johnny asked. "I wonder if I could talk to you."

The man looked up irascibly. "I'm busy; see Carl Harter."

"Where'll I find him?"

"Next door, next door." Davis waved Johnny away impatiently.

Stiffly, Johnny went to the next tent and found it vacant, but in the tent beyond he found a man stripped to the waist, washing his face and upper torso.

"Mr. Davis told me to see Mr. Harter," Johnny said to the man, "but he doesn't seem to be in his tent."

The man splashed water over his head, straightened and reached for a rough towel. He wiped his face and looked at Johnny as he continued wiping himself. "Looking for a job?"

"Perhaps, but that isn't what——"

"What do you mean, perhaps?" the man interrupted. "Either you want a job or you don't. How old are you?"

"Fifteen, but——"

"That's pretty young, but I think they need help in the kitchens. Get yourself something to eat, then come back; maybe Nicholson'll be around by that time."

"Nicholson? Who's he?"

"He's the chief timekeeper. He hires the laborers."

"What does Mr. Harter do?"

"Nosy, aren't you?"

"Not especially, but that's why I'm here. I—I'm looking for someone."

"Your father?"

"No. Some men—a man named Haskins."

"Never heard of him. But if he's working here, Nicholson's your man. He knows everyone. He keeps their time."

"Then he's the man I want to see."

The man finished drying himself and looked sharply at Johnny. "Fifteen? You look older." He made an impatient gesture. "Get yourself something to eat."

Johnny hesitated, then turned away. He mounted his horse and rode it to the edge of the camp where he dismounted and unrolled his blanket roll. He found a few scraps of dried meat, all the food he had, and munched it.

When he finished eating he waited fifteen or twenty minutes, then rode back into the camp. The man he had spoken to was gone, probably eating, but a new man was in the tent, adding figures on a large sheet of paper.

"I'm looking for Mr. Nicholson," Johnny said. "I was told he'd be——"

"I'm Nicholson." The man looked sharply at Johnny. "I haven't been taking on anyone under sixteen for the harder work, but you look pretty husky."

"I'm not looking for a job, Mr. Nicholson," Johnny said quickly.

"Then what are you doing here? There are enough hangers-on around now. We can't feed the entire indigent population of Nebraska."

"I haven't asked for any food," Johnny replied testily. "Mr. —the man who was here a little while ago said that you knew everyone who worked here."

"That's my job."

"Is someone named Haskins working here?"

Nicholson hesitated, frowned, then reached for a book at his elbow. He skimmed through a few pages, then ran his forefinger down a page. "Haskin—Lemuel Haskin—without a final 's.' That who you want?"

"No, this is Haskins, with the 's,' and his first name is Ben."

"Then this isn't the same man."

"How long has he been here?"

Nicholson grunted. "Look here, boy, what's this about? You looking for your father?"

"No. My father's dead."

"Well, what is this Haskins to you, uncle—cousin—some kin?"

"He's no relation at all."

"Then what do you want with him?"

"I can't tell you that."

Nicholson shook his head. "That'll get you nothing around here. There's no Haskins working at this camp; that's all I can tell you. And I can't waste any more time with you. A timekeeper's job doesn't stop at six o'clock."

He stopped, caught by Johnny's intense look at him. "What is it, boy?"

"You just said something, about *this* camp. Are there other camps along here?"

"There are a hundred," exclaimed Nicholson. "Two hundred for all I know. This is a track-laying camp, that's all. There are grading camps from here to Cheyenne, bridge-building camps, surveying camps. This is a big operation. I'm

told that more than two thousand people are working for the Union Pacific, and more than that number are employed by the subcontractors. We've got four hundred at this camp. Figure out for yourself how many are scattered between Omaha and Utah. I said we've got no Haskins working here. That doesn't mean there aren't a dozen scattered throughout the other camps."

Johnny Welker drew a deep breath. "Thanks for the information, Mr. Nicholson."

He started to turn away, but Nicholson exclaimed, "Wait!" Johnny turned back. "Where are you going?"

Johnny shrugged. "Why, I guess I'll have to try the other camps."

Nicholson exclaimed, "Do you know what you're talking about? This country here is fairly civilized, but if you go west you run into the Sioux. They're on the warpath. They're fighting the iron horse all the way. Our workers out there are guarded by troops, and they're fighting Indians just about every day. A man alone wouldn't last two days, and you're just a boy."

"I'll manage."

"You'll manage until you see an Indian! And then it'll be too late. Where's your home?"

"Wherever I lay down."

"You've got a family?"

"No. None whatever."

"Then who is this Haskins you're looking for?"

Johnny remained silent and Nicholson sighed wearily. "All right, keep it to yourself if it's too important for you to tell anyone. I won't pry, but I can't let you go wandering from camp to camp, up and down the line." He paused. "Ben Haskins. It almost seems to me that I should know the name. It's familiar, but I'm looking at names all day long. Haskins, Hanke, Harrison, Hanley, Hammer, Hitzenhammer—they all begin to sound alike. What's he look like, this Ben Haskins?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

Nicholson exclaimed angrily, "You don't even know what he looks like!"

"I do. I mean, he's one of four men. I've seen them all, but I don't know which of the four he is." The timekeeper looked at him narrowly. "One of the four men wore a Union Cavalry jacket."

"Three fourths of all the men working on the railroad were soldiers. Practically all those who haven't come directly

from Ireland to work on the road. There are a hundred former Union soldiers right here in this camp."

"One of the others wore gray Confederate pants."

"There are fifty former Rebs here—only they won't admit it. Mmm, go on."

"One man was over six feet tall and weighed about two hundred pounds. He's the one had the rifle."

"What kind of rifle?"

"A repeating rifle. Winchester. All of them—the man with the rifle as well—had revolvers. But they only had three horses."

"Only the contractors around here have horses, their own, I mean. The work horses are owned by the railroad, or the individual contractors. I doubt if many of the laborers have their own horses. That's something."

"They could have got the horses after they left here."

"What? These men aren't working for the railroad now?"

"I don't know," said Johnny. "They'd either quit their jobs last summer or were on their way to get jobs on the railroad."

"Last summer!"

"That's—that's when I saw them."

The man with whom Johnny had talked a half hour before stepped into the tent. Nicholson appealed to him. "Listen to this, Bayliss, this boy's asking about someone who may have worked on the railroad or may not. The man's name is Haskins, that's all he knows. He's not even sure of what he looks like."

Bayliss grinned. "I had a session with him before you did." He nodded to Johnny. "What's your name, son?"

"John Welker."

"Welker?" repeated Bayliss. "Anyone working here by that name?" Then he gasped and wheeled back to Johnny. "Did you say 'Welker'?"

"Yes."

"John Welker. That'd be Johnny Welker, eh?"

"There's no one at this camp by that name," said Nicholson.

"No, there isn't. But"—Bayliss spoke to Johnny—"mind leaving us alone for a minute?"

Johnny looked sharply at Bayliss, then turned and stepped out of the tent. He walked to his horse and started to mount, but with one foot in the stirrup, a stubbornness suddenly set on his features and he dropped the foot back on the ground. He stood by his horse, one hand resting lightly on the saddle, until Bayliss stepped from the tent and called to him.

Johnny walked back into the tent. The attitudes of both men

had changed completely. Both were serious of mien now, and their manner of treating Johnny as a boy was gone. Bayliss said carefully, "Are you from around—what is it—Salt River? I mean, have you been that way in the last two weeks?"

Johnny regarded Bayliss thoughtfully, but made no reply.

Bayliss and Nicholson exchanged glances. Then Nicholson said, "Bayliss returned from Omaha only yesterday. He's just told me of something he heard there. A—a rumor——"

"It concerned someone named Johnny Welker—a boy about your age," cut in Bayliss.

"What you're trying to ask me," Johnny said harshly, "is —am I the Johnny Welker who killed a man?"

Bayliss shot a look at Nicholson.

Johnny said tautly, "What you heard—isn't a—a rumor."

"It's true, then?" cried Nicholson. He pointed at Johnny, aghast. "You?"

A shudder suddenly shook Bayliss. "Get out of here. Get out of this camp!" He took a step toward Johnny, then stopped.

Nicholson's pointing finger stabbed at Johnny. "You heard him, you young whelp. We want no juvenile murderers in this camp—or anywhere else on the U.P. Clear out!"

Johnny turned and walked out of the tent. He went to his horse and mounted. Then he rode out of the camp. When he was clear of it, he stopped and looked over the huddle of tents where lights were beginning to go on.

He studied the scene for a long moment, then looked toward the west. Finally he shook his head and turned his horse eastward.

6

On the second day of his long vigil in the outer room of railroad headquarters in Omaha, a clerk finally signaled to Johnny Welker.

"I guess you'd wait here all summer, wouldn't you?" he said when Johnny came up.

"If I had to."

"That's what I thought. All right, Mr. Tanner will give you three minutes."

"I'll need more than that."

"Three minutes is what he told me." The clerk nodded to a door. "It's up to you."

Johnny went into the private office and found a middle-aged, heavy-set man looking up at him from behind a work-littered desk.

"You're the kid who's been waiting since yesterday morning?" he asked.

"That's right," replied Johnny. He went on quickly, "A year ago, last June, four men killed my father and mother. I know the men when I see them, but I don't know anything about them, except that one of them is named Ben Haskins——"

Tanner threw up his right hand, palm outward. "Whoa, not so fast! What's this, now? You say four men killed your father and mother? Where? When?"

"A year ago last June. It—it happened at Salt River, where my father operated a ferry."

Tanner's eyes narrowed. "I've heard of this. In fact"—he searched his desk, found a paper partly under a stack and whisked it out—"I had this from railhead last week—about a boy named Johnny Welker." Tanner studied the sheet of paper, then looked up suddenly at Johnny. "Is all this true?"

"I don't know what's on that paper," Johnny said stubbornly. "All I know is that four men killed my father and mother and—all right, I killed a man north of Salt River. That's what that's about, isn't it?"

Tanner shrugged. "It's from Fred Nicholson, yes. He—well, he wrote me about your visit. Said he had a hunch you'd be showing up here."

"Then I guess I'm wasting your time."

"No—wait. Nicholson felt pretty badly about the way he treated you. Said he drove you out without giving you a chance to tell your story. He's taken the trouble to investigate since and—well—he said that there was probably a good deal of justification. I mean that these men killed your—your family. But this man up there at Salt River, that wasn't the right man. *He* wasn't the Haskins." Tanner made an impatient gesture. "Never mind that; the point is, you're looking for a man named Ben Haskins. Right?"

"Yes."

"How old are you, fifteen?" Tanner's eyes dropped to Nicholson's letter. "You can't go after four men—four *killers*——"

"That's *my* problem, Mr. Tanner," Johnny said stubbornly. "I just want to get on the trail of these men. I thought perhaps you might help me."

"How?"

"I only know the name of one of them. I want the names of the other three. I need a—a starting point."

Tanner leaned back in his chair and drummed the desk with the fingers of his left hand. A frown creased his forehead. Then he said slowly, "I've been out along the line; I know what the country's like out there. True, I haven't been to this Salt River, but I imagine it's pretty desolate country. No towns, not even settlements. Too far from Omaha for the sheriff to look into things."

"I'm not asking the help of any sheriff," Johnny said steadily.

Tanner continued to drum the top of the desk with his fingers. "You haven't yet mentioned that these men shot you, too. . . . Oh, yes, I know that. When this rumor started to seep in from Salt River, someone found out that a farmer outside of town a ways, was the one who found you up there. They said he brought you back with him." He looked inquiringly at Johnny, but the latter gave no sign of acknowledgment or denial. Tanner went on, "Don't talk much, do you? All right, son, I'll tell you what I know. I only hope I'm doing the right thing."

A tremor shot through Johnny. "You can tell me—about them?"

Tanner got up and crossed the room to a battery of wooden files. He pulled out a drawer, rummaged through it and took out a thick account book. He brought it back to his desk and opened it. "Don't count on too much. I went through this just yesterday. You understand, with all the men we've got working on the railroad, there are dozens of them quitting all the time and new men are put on daily to take their places. Let's see, now. . . ." He stopped at a page and touched an entry with his finger: "Ben Haskins was paid off, June 2, 1865—thirty-two dollars. That means he worked for us exactly sixteen days. And here"—he began counting lines—"two, four, six—mmm, nine other men got their pay the same day."

"Nine!" exclaimed Johnny.

"Ten, altogether. And that was last year when we had far fewer people on the payroll. If it was this year, the number might be a hundred. Here are the nine names—ten, counting Haskins. Take your choice." Then, as Johnny stepped forward: "No, wait." He strode to the door and whipped it open. He called out into the waiting room. "Get me Altschuler!"

He came back, leaving the door open. "I just happened to think, in June we weren't more than ten-twelve miles from Omaha. The men still boarded here then, going out every day on the work train. I may have something for you."

A short, stubby man entered the room. "You wanted me, Mr. Tanner?"

"Yes. I want some information about some people who worked for us. Here"—Altschuler stepped forward—"June second, last year, ten men drew their pay, including this chap, Ben Haskins. Do you remember him?"

Altschuler screwed up his face in distaste. "Yes, sir, I remember him. He—he caused considerable trouble. I believe he was fired."

"Good! I mean, I'm not surprised. Think carefully now, Altschuler; this is important. Who were Ben Haskins' close friends?"

Altschuler frowned thoughtfully. "That's a little hard to say, sir. I remember Haskins because—well, sir, because he—he struck me once. I—as a matter of fact, I was very glad to see him leave the boarding camp."

Tanner nodded, then explained to Johnny, "Mr. Altschuler is in charge of our commissary. At this time, last year, when we were still working out of Omaha, he ran the boardinghouse for the company."

Altschuler exclaimed, "The man they called the Rebel—I remember now, there was some—er—talk about Haskins having been friendly with a former Confederate——"

"Haskins wore a Union-blue coat?" cried Johnny.

"When he wasn't working, yes."

"And the Confederate—what was *his* name?"

Altschuler looked perplexed. Then he leaned forward and his eye ran over the names on the page. "Webster," he said aloud, "Haskins, Conway, O'Flynn, Dworshak—I remember him, he was a Pole, I believe, which was rather unusual—mmm, Cassidy, Delaney—Delaney, mmm, no, not Delaney—Mullaney, that's it! I remember him now. He was always pretty thick with Haskins. Michael Mullaney."

"The Rebel?" exclaimed Tanner.

"No, no; Mullaney was a much bigger man. Well over six feet."

"The man with the rifle," said Johnny softly, his eyes gleaming. "Michael Mullaney."

"Mickey, they called him," said Altschuler. He screwed up his face in thought, then suddenly glanced at the book again. "The Rebel wasn't an Irishman. . . . Let's see—Webster, perhaps, but I don't think so. . . . Conway could be Irish.

. . . Dworshak isn't. Cassidy, Mullaney, Delaney—all Irish. Here—this is the Confederate! I'm sure of it. Wallington. I remember the name now. Jeff Wallington."

"Haskins," said Johnny. "Mullaney and Wallington. The fourth man?"

Altschuler looked again at the entries. "That leaves only Maas and Teaford. Maas was the Dutchman. A Hollander. I remember him, and he was certainly not one of Haskins' cronies. Teaford, I can't place."

"But he could have been a friend of Haskins?" Tanner asked.

"Not that I know of. Haskins wasn't popular with the other men. He was what you would call loud-mouthed, a bully." He hesitated. "This—this fourth man—are you certain that he quit the same day that the others did?"

Tanner looked at Johnny. The latter shook his head. "I don't know. This is more than I've known about these—these men."

Tanner showed disappointment. "He could have quit the day before, the day after, or even a week after." He turned the page in the book and groaned. "Look, here's one day when sixteen men quit their jobs." He nodded to Altschuler. "I guess you've helped as much as you can."

"Thank you, sir. If I can think of anything else, I'll let you know."

Ben Haskins. . . . Michael Mullaney. . . . Jeff Wallington!

7

Before Johnny Welker sold his horse in Omaha, he rode out to the Thompson farm. He found a family of Germans living on it. Thompson had sold out to them in March. Offlinger, the German, did not know where the Thompsons had gone.

"He look for land in the West, he tell me."

Along with his horse, Johnny disposed of his blanket, so that when he stepped into the west-bound train, everything

he owned was on his person. His coat, when buttoned, concealed the revolver that he wore thrust under his belt.

The train was crowded. Most of the passengers were workmen, some of them fresh from Ireland. It was said in later years that the Union Pacific was built by Irish whiskey and cold tea—the latter the drink of the Chinese coolies who built the Central Pacific from San Francisco to Promontory Point in Utah, where it met the Union Pacific with which it was combined before construction was fully completed. The percentage of Irish workers on the eastern section of the Union Pacific was very large.

They were a noisy crew. They worked hard and they drank hard. They fought hard, too. Their graves soon dotted the right of way, graves without markers, nameless graves of Irish paddies who came to the new world to find gold and found—graves.

There were others on the train, too. Cold-eyed men with soft hands who made their livelihoods from the work of others. Women, gay, hard women. Silent, bitter women. There were other women, too—the wives of officials, foremen, section chiefs, who would live in one camp after the other, following their husbands.

They talked. The Irishmen gabbled and whooped and some of them swore round oaths from exuberance, from the whiskey they drank as the Nebraska prairie sped past. A woman with a painted face shrieked as a man pinched her, another swore with great feeling.

Johnny Welker sat alone, at the rear of the car, his eyes looking sightlessly at the bleak countryside. A lone Indian sat his pony, fifty feet from the tracks and watched the train with sullen bitterness. Johnny did not even see him.

The train rolled on, stopping now and then at a little station, a hamlet a half hour out of Omaha, a village two hours out. Once it stopped to take on a squad of blue-coated cavalrymen.

Two Irishmen got into a fight and slugged and wrestled until the conductor and a brawny brakeman tore them apart and threatened to put them off the train.

Finally, after five hours of traveling from Omaha, the engine tooted three times and the train began to slacken speed. The passengers began to get together their luggage and effects.

This was the construction camp Johnny had visited a little more than two weeks before. Railhead was actually more than a dozen miles beyond this point, but this was as far as the passengers could go.

They poured off the train, elbowing one another, pushing, whooping, chattering, yelling. There was just as much excitement outside the train.

Johnny Welker was one of the last to get off. He worked his way through the throng and after a while found the tent that had been formerly occupied by the timekeeper, Nicholson, and Bayliss.

He started into the tent and stopped. The only occupant was a child, a towheaded slender girl of about eleven. She sat at the timekeeper's rough bench and owlishly studied Nicholson's reports.

"I guess I've made a mistake," Johnny mumbled.

The girl looked up at him brightly. "Did you want to see my daddy?"

"Mr. Nicholson's your father?"

"Oh, no, I'm Mr. Bayliss's daughter. My name's Ellen. What's yours?"

"Johnny," he replied automatically, then caught himself. "This isn't Mr. Nicholson's tent any more?"

"Of course it is. It's my daddy's, too. He—he hasn't gotten back yet and I'm waiting here for him."

"I'll come back later."

"What's your hurry? He'll be here in a little while." She cocked her head to one side. "What does your daddy do here?"

"He doesn't do anything. I mean, he—he's not here."

"Well, who is? Now, don't try to tell me that you're here alone. I'm not *that* young." Her face became serious, and she tried to look every day of her age. "How old would you say I was?"

"I don't know—ten."

Ellen Bayliss exclaimed in indignation. "Ten. Pul-lease! I'm almost twelve. Another seven months—well, eight—and I'll be twelve. You're not so much older, I'll bet."

"I'm quite a bit older," Johnny answered seriously.

"How much more?"

Nicholson started into the tent from outside. He exclaimed as he saw Johnny. "You've come back!"

"Yes, Mr. Nicholson."

Nicholson darted a glance at Ellen Bayliss and could not quite conceal a wince. "Ellen, darling, would you mind——?"

She got up. "I know when I'm not wanted," she said with dignity and walked past Johnny out of the tent.

"Bayliss's family has come out," Nicholson explained, then frowned. "Did you—go to Omaha?"

"Yes. Mr. Tanner said you'd written him about me."

"Did he tell you everything I wrote? I mean, I—I found out what happened to your father and mother——"

Johnny cut in quickly, "I'd like a job, Mr. Nicholson!"

Nicholson was taken aback. "Well, I hardly expected that from you. You've changed your mind about—things?"

"I'd like a job on the railroad," Johnny repeated.

"Oh, I guess we can find something for you to do all right. Let's see, you're fif—sixteen, I believe."

"The work doesn't matter. I'll take any kind of a job."

"The pay matters, though. Tracklayers get two dollars a day. The spikers—no, that's work for the Irish paddies. They can swing a sledge all day long. I'll tell you what, I'll put you down on the payroll and then I'll talk to Cleaver this evening. He's in charge of the graders. You've worked with horses, I imagine."

"I was raised on a farm."

"Good. You can drive a team, then. I'm sure you can keep up your end without trouble. The pay's the same—two dollars a day. Seven in the morning until six at night. And that'll mean working with lanterns in another month."

There was a step outside the tent and Bayliss entered. He did not seem surprised to see Johnny. He nodded coolly. "Hello, Johnny, how are you?"

"All right."

"I've just put him on the payroll," Nicholson said.

"Fine."

"Supper'll be ready in a half hour, Johnny," Nicholson said. "After you eat, come back and I'll have you assigned to one of the tents."

Johnny nodded and left the tent. After he was gone Nicholson looked inquiringly at Bayliss. The latter shook his head. "Ellen caught me as I came in. Said she'd been talking to someone named Johnny." He frowned. "I wonder what he found out in Omaha."

"I didn't ask him," Nicholson said.

"Strange he'd come back here for a job."

"There's no one here named Haskins. I checked. The Haskin we have has no connection with the boy."

"Perhaps not. I wasn't putting much stock in the name business, anyway. The men who did for his family have most certainly changed their names by now. They might be Smith, Jones——"

"Nicholson, even."

"Don't talk nonsense." Bayliss looked toward the door of the tent. "I'll see that Ellen stays away from here."

8

The ground was frozen solid most of the mornings in early November, but work continued until the twentieth of the month, when a blizzard swept in from the western part of the state and inundated the track-laying camp with a foot of snow and, where it drifted, up to five feet or more.

Many of the workers had already quit for the season and gone east. The majority of those who were left bundled themselves into the coaches and rode to Omaha. A few stopped off at villages here and there, and another few went west, although there was no track within twenty miles of North Platte where the company had been building a camp of considerable proportions. Ties had been freighted in from the West and North and South. A mountain of supplies had been brought in and stored in tents, in frame and sod shacks, every available place. A flimsy boardinghouse had been built for workers and it was packed with boarders, not all of whom were railroad workers wintering in North Platte.

The tent saloons that had dotted the prairie near the construction camps at railhead, disappeared with the blizzard, but reappeared in North Platte. Some were replaced by wooden buildings, some had boards nailed up to the height of a man, to re-enforce the canvas walls.

A certain amount of work went on during the winter months. The surveyors made reports, the engineers worked on plans, built bridges on paper, constructed grades and filled in ravines and canyons. The commissary department checked supplies. Freighters still brought in wagonloads of things that would be needed in the spring.

A hundred and forty miles of railroad had been built in two seasons, and all preparations were being made now to carry the road to Cheyenne, perhaps beyond, during the season of 1867.

There was trouble for the Union Pacific. Financial trouble, political. The Credit Mobilier Scandal had rocked Washington. Millions of dollars had been squandered, stolen. Congress-

men and senators had been bribed. Fortunes were made by scalawags and thieves. And from the West Coast, the Central Pacific was creeping eastward. A rival railroad, backed by Western gold and silver. If it crossed the mountains, it would be the death knell of the tottering Union Pacific.

A railroad would be built. The government wanted it, but it did not want to enrich thousands of scoundrels in the building of it. A bloody, costly war had been fought only recently. The treasury in Washington was depleted. Yet, a railroad must be built. And it *was* being built.

None of this concerned the workers. Only vague rumors of disaster seeped into the camp at North Platte, and only the higher echelon of workers were concerned with them.

Johnny Welker knew nothing of finance or the problems of management. He was in North Platte. The railroad, he had decided that summer, was the most important thing the West had ever known. All men in the West would come to it.

Haskins . . . Mullaney . . . Wallington and Number Four had once worked on the Union Pacific. They would probably work on it again when their money ran out, when their villainy did not pay them enough. And even if they did not return to it as workers, the railroad was attracting all men in the West who were *not* workers—gamblers, saloonkeepers, thieves, outlaws . . . killers. Sooner or later, Haskins and his bloody cohorts would come to the railroad.

Sooner or later, Johnny would see them.

He looked for them through the winter. He spent hours sitting by the stove in the boardinghouse. He made the rounds of the saloons, the stores, and finally, when he had no more money to pay for his board, he got a job in Matt Fedderson's Saloon. A swamper. His food, some blankets in the storeroom and two dollars every Saturday.

It was in Fedderson's Saloon that he first saw Cass Porter.

Porter rode into North Platte shortly after Christmas. He was a lean man with habitually slitted eyes. He might have been twenty-five and could have been thirty. He wore a shabby overcoat and his trousers and jacket were frayed and torn. He wore a revolver in a holster that was tied to his leg with a rawhide thong. He also carried a Winchester repeating rifle which he sold to Fedderson's bartender within ten minutes after arriving. Then he took his gaunt horse to the Union Pacific stables and sold it for half of what it was worth. The Union Pacific had the only horse fodder in North Platte, but they had a good many horses in the stables and did not like to sell hay and grain to outsiders.

Returning to Fedderson's Saloon, Cass Porter bought a single drink and standing at the bar, nursed it for a half hour. Then Fedderson moved up behind the bar.

"How's the snow out West?" Fedderson asked.

"Same as here," Porter replied shortly.

"Come far?" Fedderson pursued.

Porter drained the last few drops of whiskey from his glass and set it on the bar. "My name," he said, "is Cass Porter. I figure on staying in North Platte awhile."

Fedderson chuckled. "And to hell with me and everybody else who asks questions."

Porter shrugged. "I'm not against sitting in a game of poker, now and then. If the other players take the game seriously."

"And don't talk too much, eh? All right, Mr. Porter, you won't have any trouble here."

Yet Cass Porter had trouble only two days later. He drank no more than two glasses of whiskey in a single day and never while he played cards, but he could not prevent others from drinking, and there was much whiskey in North Platte and little to do during the long days.

A strapping Irishman got into a poker game in which Porter was sitting. He lost steadily and every time he lost a pot he called for another drink. He finally spilled a glass of whiskey on the table. Porter gathered together his money and got up.

"Deal me out," he said.

The drunken tracklayer promptly took offense. "Quit when you're winning! That's about what you can expect from a two-bit cardsharp."

Porter's mouth twitched, but he turned away from the table. The Irishman got to his feet, knocking over his chair.

"I'm talkin' to you, you goddam cardsharp," he cried. He stooped, fumbled for the chair he had overturned and caught hold of it. "Don't you walk away when I'm talkin' to you."

He threw the chair at Porter. His aim was bad; the chair missed Porter by six feet and crashed to a table near by, where it hit a card player, one of the professional gamblers who frequented Fedderson's.

In a flash Porter whirled. He took two quick steps back. His right fist darted out and caught the drunken Irishman flush on the jaw. The man went down and lay still. Porter gestured to a couple of the Irishman's friends. "Take him to his bunk and let him sleep it off."

He turned to face the angry gambler who had a gun in his fist. "You just saved a man's life," the gambler snapped.

Across the room, a broom in his hand, Johnny Welker

looked thoughtfully at Porter's back as the lean man walked out of the saloon.

Fedderson came up beside Johnny. "That's yourself a dozen years from now." Then, as Johnny looked at him impassively, "Oh, I know about you, Johnny." He chuckled. "You forgot to close the door the other night. I saw you practicing with that Navy gun. Not bad at all, but you ought to get yourself a holster for the gun. And tie it down like Porter does. That's the way the real gun fighters do it."

Johnny began sweeping and Fedderson watched him a minute, shaking his head.

Johnny spoke to Cass Porter for the first time the next day. It was a raw day and the morning trade was slack, but Porter came in about mid-morning and seated himself at a corner table and dealt out a hand of solitaire.

Johnny, finished with his morning's work, moved over to Porter's table and watched him make several plays. Then Porter looked up. "Sit down, Johnny."

Johnny hesitated a moment, then took a seat opposite Porter. "What is it?" Porter asked.

"I want to ask you something, Mr. Porter."

"Go ahead."

"It's about . . ." Johnny's own taciturnity almost stopped him, but he went on, blurting it out. "Is it true that you're a gun fighter?"

Porter made another play with his cards, then looked at Johnny. "Somebody put you up to this?"

"No," Johnny said quickly. "I—I have a reason for asking."

Porter said, "You don't ask a man a question like that. But I'll answer. No, I'm not a gun fighter." He paused a moment, a slight frown growing on his face. "I won't say that I don't know how to use a gun. I do and—and I've used it." He paused again, then added gently, "I know about Salt River, Johnny."

Johnny said awkwardly, "I thought maybe you could give me some pointers. I've never talked to anyone about—gun fighting."

Porter's eyes slitted even more than customary and after a moment his glance dropped back to his cards. He dealt out several. Johnny pushed back his chair.

Then Porter said quietly, "Bring your gun to my room in an hour."

Cass Porter had rented a little cubicle in the company boardinghouse. An hour after he had talked to him in the saloon, Johnny Welker knocked on the door of Porter's room.

Porter opened the door. "Come in."

He was in shirt sleeves, but wore his gun, tied down to his leg. Johnny entered and closed the door. He unbuttoned his coat and drew the Navy gun from under his belt.

"No holster?" Porter asked.

"I couldn't afford one when I bought the gun."

Porter took the gun from Johnny and swung out the cylinder. He noted that the chambers were empty, then cocked the gun. He looked at Johnny in surprise. "Filed!" He touched the trigger gently and when the hammer snapped, nodded.

"All right." He handed the gun back to Johnny. "Let me see you draw."

Johnny put the gun behind the belt and let his hands hang loosely at his sides.

"Now!" Porter said.

Johnny whipped out the gun, cocked the hammer and snapped the trigger. Porter's slitted eyes widened a little. "Try it again."

Johnny drew again. Then several more times. Porter sat down on his cot. "You've put in some practice."

"Every day. An hour at least, sometimes more."

"Why, Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head. "I've got to."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be sixteen in a month."

"And you've already killed a man!"

Johnny stiffened. "I thought *you* would understand."

"Stay, Johnny. I want to talk to you. I'm not going to lecture you. Lord knows, I'm not the man for that. I've seen a lot of blood, Johnny. I've seen a lot of dead men. *I* was practicing with a gun when I was less than your age. I grew up in Clay County, Missouri. My father was killed by Kansas Jayhawkers twelve years ago, in 'fifty-five. I—I rode with Quantrell during the war, and there were boys with us even younger than you." A wan smile flitted across his features. "They call me a gun fighter. All right, I'll tell you. I never saw a gun fighter who carried his gun stuck under his belt, but right now, without your changing a thing, you could shoot me down before I could get my gun out of the holster."

Johnny looked at Porter narrowly. "You—mean that?"

Porter exhaled. "Practice all you like, or don't practice at all. I don't know how well you can shoot, but at close range, there isn't a man I know who'd have a chance against you right now!"

9

In mid-March when the ground was still frozen to a depth of two feet, the wagons began to roll into North Platte. They brought ties, rails, spikes; they brought food for man and horse. They brought scrapers, handcars, gunpowder, surveying instruments and they brought cement and steel for building bridges.

Men came to North Platte, Irishmen who had been on the Atlantic Ocean a week before and rushed west from New York. Soldiers poured through North Platte by troops, companies and battalions.

Hugh Bayliss was one of the first to arrive. Johnny Welker saw him once or twice, but Bayliss did not seem to know him. He was too busy for idle conversation, anyway. The policy of the Union Pacific in 1867 was to build roadbeds and lay tracks in sections. Only so many men could be concentrated at one point. You could only put down one tie at a time, one rail had to be spiked before another could be put in place. Time was of the essence, and it was now planned to build sections of ten, twenty and fifty miles and link them together as each crew advanced to the section ahead of it.

Bayliss's new job was to hurdle North Platte and advance a hundred miles to the west where he would be in charge of three different sections of track to be laid. His work as an engineer had been recognized and his promotion was the result.

Bayliss stayed in North Platte only a few days, then with an advance crew of surveyors and engineers, moved on. A few days later Nicholson arrived in North Platte and began assembling work crews to be sent forward to various sections.

Johnny Welker appeared before him and was greeted warmly by the timekeeper. "I've been thinking of you during the winter, Johnny. Let's see, you're about seventeen now." Johnny was only sixteen, but Nicholson had added a year to his age in 'sixty-six in order to give him a better-paying job and the fiction seemed to have remained with him. "You've grown an inch or two and you've filled out. But we've got

plenty of strong backs. What I need are some men who're handy with guns." He hesitated a little, but continued. "Some so-called white men who'd murder their own grandmothers for money have been selling the Indians rifles all through the winter, and the trouble we had last year will be a picnic compared to this summer. I have it on good authority that the Ogallala Sioux have four hundred repeating Winchesters in addition to other guns. We'll be laying track in the Ogallala country inside of a month and as a result of these renegades we can expect a warm time of it. We'll have soldiers, yes, but we're going to have to send out some good men of our own, men who know how to use guns."

"These men who sell the rifles to the Indians," Johnny said, "how do you get your information about them?"

"Through friendly Indians, through scouts, reports from the military." Nicholson looked sharply at Johnny. "Why, Johnny, what's on your mind?"

Johnny said, "I spent all winter at North Platte. I never once heard any mention of Haskins, Mullaney and Wallington."

Nicholson exclaimed, "I thought you'd gotten over that by now." He shook his head. "I was going to send you out as a scout, but if you've still got that private revenge on your mind——"

"I'll take the job!"

Nicholson hesitated, then exhaled and shrugged. "All right, Johnny, I'll give you a chance. Here"—he scribbled on a printed form—"go over to the supply depot; they'll give you a rifle and blankets. Then go down to the stables and pick yourself out a horse."

A half hour later, Johnny knocked on the door of Cass Porter's room at the boardinghouse. There was no response from inside the room, but Johnny noted that the door had swung open a few inches. He poked his head inside. Porter's effects were gone.

He went to the saloon and found Fedderson in his office. "I've taken a job with the railroad," he said.

Fedderson sighed. "I thought you would. Well, good luck, Johnny."

Johnny nodded. "Have you seen Cass Porter today?"

"He's pulled out."

"When?" exclaimed Johnny.

"Early this morning. Didn't he tell you he was going?"

Johnny shook his head. "Did he say where he was headed?"

"Porter talks about as much as you." Fedderson shrugged.

"He's probably gone west to set up at Ogallala or Julesburg. I'll be going that way myself in a few months." He smiled thinly. "We move along with the track."

Later in the day a workman told Johnny that Nicholson wanted to see him. Johnny went to the timekeeper's office. "You've got your things?" Then, as Johnny nodded, "Good. A wagon train's starting west in the morning. Some of the engineers' families are going to Ogallala and three or four wagons with equipment they need badly. There's no soldiers here now so I'm sending some scouts along with them. It's only a three-day trip, but I think we ought to play it safe. You leave in the morning, but you'd better report now to—let's see—Merry Jack; no, that's Jack Merry. He'll be in charge."

Johnny found Jack Merry at the corral by the stables. He was a former sergeant of infantry who had marched through Georgia with Sherman.

"They must be scrapin' the bottom of the barrel," he growled as he sized up Johnny. "You're only a kid."

"I'll hold up my end," said Johnny curtly.

"Well," said Jack Merry, grinning wickedly, "the boy's got pepper. That's fine, just fine. I ain't whipped a cub since just after the battle of Atlanta. By that time the young squirts like yourself was either dead or good soldiers who knew better than to sass a sergeant." He struck Johnny's shoulder with his fist. "Sleep down here tonight. We move out at dawn."

Johnny carried his blankets to the corral after dark, but it was hours before he was able to sleep. Horses were rousted about in the stable and corrals, wagons were moved back and forth, and teamsters yelled and cursed.

It was still dark when he rolled up his blankets and saddled the horse he had drawn. Several fires were already burning, and he went to one of them and got some coffee.

Jack Merry came storming around the wagons. "Let's get rolling!" he roared.

There was a vast commotion around the corrals, but wagons began to move and in a half hour the last of them cleared North Platte. Johnny, riding near the head of the column, turned in his saddle. There were a dozen wagons in the train. Some, heavily loaded with supplies and equipment, were driven by U.P. teamsters, but there were prairie schooners bringing up the rear. They carried several women and a number of children, families of higher echelon workers on the railroad, who were moving forward to join the heads of the families. In addition to the nine teamsters who drove the

company wagons, there were, besides Johnny, five mounted men, armed with rifles, who were supposedly the fighting escort of the train.

Jack Merry rode a huge bay some yards ahead of the column. When they were a half hour out of North Platte, he pulled to one side and waited for the other armed men to come up. When they had gathered around him, he growled, "I'm in command of this here detail, and it's gonna be run like an army outfit. We're in enemy territory, and the on'y way to travel in enemy territory is like the army does." He pointed to one of the men. "You'll ride point. That means you get up there a half mile ahead of the outfit and you keep your eyes peeled. You"—he pointed to another man—"you stay half-way between him and the outfit." He assigned the third man to ride the right flank, the fourth to bring up the rear, then came to Johnny. He grimaced. "That leaves you for the left flank where there's least likely to be any trouble. But mind you, you keep your eyes open."

Johnny rode his horse at an easy lope a half mile from the wagon train. They were traveling in open country and an enemy could be seen miles away. He rode easily, matching his pace with that of the slow-moving wagon train. In midmorning they passed a train of empty wagons going back to North Platte, and around noon, two riders came along from the west. They stopped to talk to Jack Merry.

In late afternoon, probably a half hour before sunset, the wagons formed a tight circle and Johnny rode in to them. He met Jack Merry as he approached.

"Here, you," bellowed Merry. "What's the idee desertin' your post?"

"You stopped for the day."

"That's no reason the pickets should come in," snapped Merry. "When we're stopped we need the guard more than ever."

"I haven't eaten anything all day, if you'll remember."

Merry grunted. "All right, get some grub, then hightail it back where you were."

"All night?"

"There'll be a change of watch every four hours. On second thought, I'll send the teamsters out for the first watch. You go out in four hours."

10

Johnny unsaddled his horse and turned it loose inside the enclosure made by the wagons. Several fires had been lit and food was being cooked over them. Johnny found a fire at which several teamsters were preparing their supper. He was about to sit down when a voice called to him, "Yoo-hoo, Johnny!"

Startled, he turned. A towheaded girl of about twelve was running toward him. It was Ellen Bayliss, the young daughter of the construction engineer with whom he had talked for a few minutes the previous summer.

"Hello," Johnny said awkwardly.

She was delighted at seeing an old "friend." "I saw you this morning, just as you were riding out there." She pointed to the south. "We're going up to meet Daddy," she babbled. "We've been living in Omaha all winter and I've been going to school." She caught Johnny's arm. "Tell me, is it true that the Indians are on the warpath?"

"There've been reports," Johnny said cautiously.

"Those men this morning said there was a big war party between here and Ogallala. Do you think they'll attack us? Mother says our wagon train's too big to be attacked."

"I don't know," Johnny said. "I didn't see any signs of any Indians."

The girl seemed disappointed. "Gosh, I've never seen any Indians, I mean not real wild Indians. Only the Omahas, and they're tame."

A woman in her early thirties was coming toward Johnny and the girl. "Ellen," she called, "your supper's ready."

Johnny looked at the woman who was Mrs. Bayliss, and a half gasp was torn from his throat. Mrs. Bayliss was about thirty-two or thirty-three, a rather tall woman in the bloom of maturity. For just an instant Johnny had seen another face —the face of his mother. Two years ago she had been the age of Mrs. Bayliss, approximately the same height and build.

"Mother," exclaimed Ellen, "this is Johnny. He's an old friend."

Mrs. Bayliss smiled and held out her hand. "How do you do, Johnny?"

Johnny took her hand awkwardly and dropped it immediately. "I'm John Welker."

"Welker?" For an instant Mrs. Bayliss's face was sober, but then she was smiling again. "I'm glad to know you, Johnny. Won't you come and have supper with us?"

"Please, Johnny!" cried Ellen. "It'll be fun, having company for supper."

She caught his hand, tugged at him and because he did not know how to make his excuses, Johnny allowed himself to be dragged along.

There was another woman at their fire, a heavy-set woman who looked as if she might have been raised on a farm. She had two small children, the older about seven or eight, the younger only two. She was already ladling out beans onto tin plates.

Johnny ate with the two families while Ellen Bayliss rattled on, alternately talking about herself, then asking Johnny questions, most of which he parried. Ellen did not seem to mind when he did not immediately reply to a question; she had another ready and when he did not answer that one, she shot a third at him.

He ate quickly, then rose to his feet. "I've got to look after my horse."

"Come back when you're through!" cried Ellen.

He went off in the half-light to where he had left his saddle and blanket roll. He carried them to the shelter of one of the construction wagons and was unrolling the blankets, when he heard footsteps beside him.

Johnny looked up and saw that it was Mrs. Bayliss. "I wanted to talk to you without Ellen around," she said quietly.

He got quickly to his feet.

"Ellen's at the impressionable age," Mrs. Bayliss went on. "This is exciting to her—glamorous. She's fascinated with the Western life—and people."

Johnny said tightly, "Yes, Mrs. Bayliss."

"I—I know who you are, Johnny. My husband told me about you." Mrs. Bayliss stopped. "You—you understand . . ."

Johnny made no reply. He had been through this before.

Mrs. Bayliss said, "I don't mean to be unkind, Johnny."

"Put a rope on her," Johnny said harshly. "Keep her away from me!" He turned away from Mrs. Bayliss and dropped to his knees.

Mrs. Bayliss said, "I'm sorry." Then she turned away.

Johnny took up his blanket roll and carried it outside the circle of wagons, where he spread it out.

He did not sleep. The camp gradually settled down, became quiet, and Johnny lay on his blankets, staring at the stars in the inverted bowl above him.

Hours later he heard the crunch of boots, then Jack Merry's voice as he awakened one of the pickets. Johnny got up quickly and went toward Merry.

The wagon-train leader grunted, "Where you been? I've been lookin' for you."

"I'm here."

"Then get out there and relieve the sentry."

Johnny found his horse among the others, saddled it and rode out upon the prairie. He had no trouble finding the sentry, who was not more than a couple of hundred yards from the wagon train.

"Shore gets lonesome out here," the man said, yawning.

Johnny made no reply. The man looked after him. "That's right, get out farther. I—I was just comin' in when I saw you."

It was a lie, of course. The sentry had moved in closer to the camp because it was safer.

Johnny rode out a full half mile, got down from his horse and staked it out on a short rope. He paced the prairie the entire four hours of his watch and when he was finally relieved, he merely moved a few hundred yards closer to the camp and then staked out his horse again and went to sleep on the ground near by.

Shortly after dawn Johnny went into the camp and had coffee and beans at a teamster's early fire.

Jack Merry came over. "I ain't puttin' much stock in that war-party story those fellas mentioned yesterday, but just the same we got a passel of women and kids here, so we can't take no chances. Keep your eyes open. This'll be the day if they're gonna attack us. Tomorrow we'll be too close to Ogallala."

It happened two hours after the wagon train got on the move. The flat prairie changed to rolling country. The point, a half mile ahead of the train, crested a ridge and apparently rode down the other side. But he was seen no more.

The second vedette approached the rise and suddenly whirled his horse and started back at a gallop to the wagon train. His rifle cracked, and then a horde of Indians appeared over the ridge, whooping and firing. The vedette's horse broke in its stride and threw its rider. The man got to his feet, tried to run, but was cut down by Indian bullets.

11

There was no time for the wagon train to form a circle. The remaining vedettes began a mad gallop to get back to the wagons, and the teamsters pulled up wherever they were and reached for their guns. They had time to drop to the ground and then the Indians were upon them.

The only thing that saved the entire company from being wiped out in that first charge was the lack of organization among the Indians. They swooped down upon the train, the horde breaking as they came upon the wagons, some going down one side, the remainder down the other. They discharged their rifles and arrows upon everything and everyone.

They were poor shots with the guns, but they fired so many bullets that some of them could not help but find their marks. Horses were hit—some killed, others wounded. Some were driven into a panic and galloped off. Two wagons were overturned.

The teamsters, well-armed, poured a withering fire upon the Indians and dropped a number of them from their ponies. Here and there an Indian bounced from his horse and made a rush for a wagon. Most were cut down by bullets, but one or two reached their objectives.

Johnny Welker saw one vedette whirl back before he had time to fire his revolver.

The distance Johnny had to travel was somewhat longer than what the Indians had to cover, but he rode so furiously that he was able to gain the rear end of the wagon train just as the Indians passed the front of it.

He plummeted to the ground while his horse was still galloping and turned a complete somersault on the prairie. He came to his feet and running a few swift steps, dove for the ground under the second to the last wagon in the train.

The Indians were upon him then and he began firing swiftly, with terrific carnage. An Indian went down, a second one's horse was hit in the head and threw the Indian. Johnny dropped the savage as he scrambled to his feet. The Indians made poor targets. They rode bareback, clutching the manes

of the horses with one hand and keeping their bodies low behind the far side of the horse. Sometimes only a hand and a leg was visible from the other side, offering virtually no target in the swirling dust created by the galloping horses.

The safest target was the horse itself, but this was a dangerous thing. An Indian on the ground had no place to go but forward and usually made a rush for the wagons.

The Indians were well armed, the majority of them having rifles. Only a few carried bows and arrows and still fewer lances. But the fire-power of their guns depended upon the volume, rather than the accuracy, and that as much as anything saved the members of the wagon train from quick annihilation.

The two columns of Indians swept past the wagon train, continued on out of rifleshot, then assembled in a solid clump, apparently to make a return sweep.

That gave the members of the wagon train time to reload their rifles and prepare to make a better stand.

Jack Merry came running down the line of wagons. "This way," he shouted. "Let's get together in one bunch. Follow me!"

Teamsters came running from all directions; so did the other members of the train, the women and the children. But not all. The oldest of the two children who had eaten with Johnny Welker the night before ran up, crying. His mother and the younger child did not make their appearance.

There were weeping women, hysterical children and cursing men.

Jack Merry shot one look around the assembled force and turned ashen. "Where's the rest?" he cried hoarsely.

"That's all," one of the teamsters replied grimly.

Merry reeled as if struck with a fist. "We can't hold them off. There's a hundred Indians in that party."

"And two white men," added one of the teamsters.

"White men?"

"Renegades!" spat one of the men.

Johnny Welker grabbed the man's arm. "What'd they look like?"

"I didn't look at their faces, but I almost got one of them!" The man's face twisted. "The dirty murderers!"

"Here they come!" howled Jack Merry. "Down!" He was already throwing himself to the ground when he got out the last command.

A woman screamed in sheer terror. It was Mrs. Bayliss. Her daughter clung to her. "Down, Ma, down!" the girl cried. "You'll get hit." She tried to pull her mother to the ground,

but Mrs. Bayliss was beyond reason. Johnny Welker, on his knees, lunged forward and struck her behind her right knee. Mrs. Bayliss screamed again, but fell to her knees.

"Fire!" cried Jack Merry. "Give 'em hell!"

The Indians were still from two to three hundred yards away, coming in a solid phalanx. They were already firing, the bullets hitting the earth, striking wagon wheels, zipping through canvas wagon tops.

Johnny Welker scrambled forward, caught Ellen Bayliss. "Get behind me," he cried, but was not heard above the din. He tried to tear the girl from her mother, but Ellen clung to her. Then suddenly, Mrs. Bayliss in her fright got to her feet to run. Johnny reached for her. He saw her body jerk, and he gritted his teeth and sprang up. He took two quick steps ahead, got in front of Ellen and dropped to his knees.

He raised himself to one knee, thrust out his Navy gun but held his fire.

The Indians pounded down, a hundred feet, then fifty. Guns were banging all around Johnny before he pulled the trigger the first time.

A horse broke, plummeted to the ground. Johnny fired a second time, a third. A second horse fell. Johnny fired again. A horse hit by one of the other defenders, stumbled, piled up three horses behind it. An Indian, on foot, appeared out of the mass, came running forward. A bullet hit the Indian; he reeled but continued on. Ten feet from him, Johnny brought the man down with a well-placed bullet.

Something tugged at his coat sleeve, a red-hot iron seared his left biceps. Then, out of the welter of attackers, appeared a face—a distorted, wild-eyed face.

The face of the Rebel! The man who had worn gray pants two years ago when he had helped to murder Johnny Welker's father and mother. The man was almost past when Johnny saw him, leaped to his feet and pulled the trigger.

And the trigger snapped on an empty chamber!

An Indian tried to ride Johnny down with his horse. A teamster's bullet knocked the man from his horse and sent the body plummeting into Johnny. He went down, rolled over and then caught up a rifle that had been dropped by one of the defenders. He levered a cartridge into the chamber, fired into the mass of Indians who had passed him. He fired a second time.

And then the Indians were out of range.

A single bullet was fired by one of the teamsters at a wounded Indian who was crawling forward.

"Godalmighty!" cried Jack Merry in awe. "Them Indians

is worse'n any Rebels ever was. They don't stop—they come at you and come at you."

"Look!" cried a man.

Johnny turned, looked to the west. The Indians had passed the last wagon of the train, but were not assembling. Instead they had fanned out and were galloping off to the north. The reason became apparent as a detachment of cavalry swooped over the knoll to the west and took off after the Indians.

There was only a troop of them, less men than there were left in the war party, but the Indians had made two savage attacks upon the wagon train, had lost a considerable number of men and were in no condition to face a troop of well-drilled, hard-shooting cavalrymen.

A quick survey was made of the survivors of the wagon train. At least half of the teamsters had fallen; most of the survivors bore a wound of some kind. Blood was streaming down Jack Merry's face from a head wound and blood was soaking his shirt front. The greatest casualties, however, were the noncombatants, the women and children. Only one woman was alive.

Mrs. Bayliss and Ellen were both down, Mrs. Bayliss dead. Ellen, whimpering, began to crawl toward Johnny Welker. "Mama's dead, mama's dead," she moaned.

The girl, however, had only a flesh wound. Johnny barely glanced at it before he turned away. One of the others could bind up the wound. He ran quickly down the line of wagons, his eyes searching the Indian dead.

He turned back and his eyes fell upon an Indian pony, standing near by. He approached the animal which shied at first, but stopped a few feet away.

Johnny held out his hand to the pony, spoke a soothing word, then suddenly lunged for the rope bridle. His fingers caught it and he dug his heels into the ground as the horse tried to tear away from him. Then he vaulted onto its back.

"Here, you!" shouted Jack Merry. "Where are you going?"

"After the Indians."

"The hell you are! You're staying here with the rest of us."

Johnny swerved the animal and rode it up to Jack Merry. "I'm going after them," he said. "Don't try to stop me."

"You go, and I'll see that you're fired for it," snarled Merry.

Johnny gave the former soldier a contemptuous glance and turned the Indian pony away. He half expected Merry to shoot and was prepared to throw himself forward upon the horse's neck, but no shot came after him.

He kicked the pony's flanks with both heels, and the mount began to cover the prairie at astonishing speed. A half mile

from the wagon train, Johnny heard a bugle sounding ahead of him. He sent his horse in a wide circle, crested a knoll and pulled it up.

Far ahead was a cloud of dust that was the Indians making their escape. A mile below, the cavalry was reforming, giving up its pursuit. Catching up with a scattered Indian force was a job for a bigger detachment than this one.

Johnny rode down the far side of the knoll to put it between him and the cavalry.

He rode swiftly for a half hour, then veered to the right, crossed a ridge. The Indians were out of sight, but there was no difficulty in following their trail.

Johnny kept on it, resting the Indian pony a couple of times. Shortly after noon, he pulled up. The Indians had halted here and the grass was cut up where the horses milled around. But a little farther on, one group of tracks headed westward, another straight north.

Johnny dismounted and holding on to the bridle of the pony, studied the tracks. Indian ponies were usually unshod. It was possible that the Rebel and the other white man with the Indians were riding Indian ponies, but . . .

No! There was the mark of horseshoes going off with the westbound Indians. Johnny remounted and followed.

There was another division a couple of hours later, but the iron-shod horses had gone with the westward-headed Indians, and Johnny continued in that direction. There were only a dozen Indians left in this group and Johnny began to hope that there would be still another split, but that hope was soon dashed. The Indian trail joined another, also fresh tracks. They had merged with a new group of Indians.

The augmented trail continued across a shallow stream, and along it for three or four miles. Then Johnny suddenly pulled up his horse. He listened and heard the distant barking of a dog.

An Indian village was ahead.

He dismounted and, looking around, saw a coulee cutting off to the right a hundred yards back. He led the pony into the ravine out of sight of the stream. He tied it to a bush and sat down on the ground.

It was already close to nightfall when Johnny entered the coulee, but he remained there for a good hour after darkness fell. Then he got to his feet and again mounted the Indian pony. He rode cautiously along the stream for a mile before he smelled smoke and got down from the horse.

He led it forward a few hundred yards along the stream. When the water made a turn to the right, Johnny saw the

Indian camp ahead of him, not more than three hundred yards away.

He stopped and studied it awhile. It contained not more than forty or fifty lodges, which meant a total population of possibly two hundred. He examined his revolver, saw that it was fully loaded and tied the pony to a stout bush.

Finally, stooping low, he trotted toward the village. Dogs were barking continuously at some point or other, but Johnny paid no heed to them.

When he was a hundred yards from the village, he got down to a crouch and moved forward. There were a number of fires in the Indian village, but in the center was an unusually large fire, and Johnny kept his eyes on it.

He approached a lodge and got down on his knees. Listening carefully, he crawled slowly forward until his fingers touched the buffalo skin. He heard no sound inside the lodge.

He moved carefully around it until he could look down toward the center of the village. Almost all of the Indians of the village seemed to be congregated there, engaged in some kind of pow-wow.

A booming Indian voice seemed to be making a speech of some kind. It was interrupted every moment or two by a loud chorus of yelps and whoops. Indians were continually passing back and forth between Johnny and the fire.

Near by a dog barked. Johnny paid no attention until a snarling animal hurtled toward him. He whipped out his revolver and as the dog lunged at him, smacked it hard on the nose. The dog let out a yelp of pain, then yipping, scurried away.

Johnny dropped to the ground and froze. But no Indians came to investigate. One of them was always hitting a dog.

Carefully he raised himself to his knees. The conclave around the big fire was breaking up. Johnny started to scurry back out of sight, then stopped.

Several Indians were coming toward him. One of them wore a hat!

Johnny crouched low, his eyes piercing the darkness.

An Indian left the group, went into a lodge; another. The man wearing the hat was still coming forward. Two more Indians dropped off into lodges, and only two men remained. They came forward—up to the second to the last tent. There both turned in.

Johnny waited no more. He crawled back, turned and on hands and knees, made his way to the second tent. Reaching it, he dropped flat to the ground.

Voices came from inside the tent.

A voice that Johnny had heard once before said, "They've lost their nerve. They won't fight again."

"Not until they get a bigger bunch together."

"They had enough in their crowd today to wipe out that whole bunch. The damfools, just because they got licked, they blame it on the guns. Say they don't shoot straight."

"They shoot straight enough for our folks!"

The first voice swore roundly. "We're getting out of here tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? They won't like it."

"The hell with what they like. We got to make a livin', and we can't sell no more guns to this crowd."

Johnny drew himself up to his knees. He crawled toward the front of the tent, stopping seven or eight feet from the opening.

He said softly, "Wallington!"

There was an exclamation inside the tent, then silence.

"Wallington," Johnny repeated. "Haskins."

"Who's that?" cried a voice inside the tent.

Johnny waited a moment, then called gently, "Wallington. Hask——" He stopped.

The head and shoulders of Wallington, the Rebel, appeared in the opening. Behind him, although still in the gloom, was a second white man.

Johnny pushed himself up from the ground. "Remember Salt River, Wallington?" he asked.

The Rebel cried out, started to thrust a rifle ahead of him.

Johnny fired. Wallington cried out hoarsely, started to fall. Johnny lunged forward, tried to avoid Wallington's falling body, but could not. Wallington slumped against him, knocked him off balance.

Inside the tent, a gun roared. Flame lanced at Johnny. He dropped to his knees, thrust his revolver into the darkened tent and fired two, three quick shots.

That was all he dared. The first shot had started every dog in the village to barking and rushing toward him. Indians yelled, and there was a sudden pounding and rushing about.

Johnny whirled and plunged into the darkness behind the tents. Dogs followed, but he was heedless. Bent low, he ran at top speed toward the river.

A snarling dog caught up with him. He kicked it savagely aside. Another dog snapped at his heel, tore at his thigh. Johnny shot it.

That was like a signal. Guns began to bang behind him and bullets thudded into the ground and tore through brush all around him.

Johnny ran.

Ahead, the Indian pony he had captured that morning, whickered, showing him the way. He plunged toward it, tore loose the slipknot with which he had tied the animal to the bush and vaulted onto its back.

A bullet smacked into a tree near by, but it was blind shooting. Johnny turned the horse downstream and dug his knees into its sides. The pony plunged away.

There was pursuit, of course, but the Indians had to go to their horse cavvy and by that time Johnny had a good head start. He drove his horse across the shallow stream to the far side, then gave it its head.

In ten minutes he pulled up. There was no one within a half mile of him. He continued on through the night.

12

Ogallala had its brief day as construction headquarters and then it was Julesburg, once an important stop on the stagecoach lines. Julesburg swelled and roared and then, overnight, it became merely a station on the railroad. The rails went west in that year of 1867 with astonishing rapidity. Three miles a day, then four and finally, as the crews acquired machinelike precision, five miles a day.

As the summer wore on, headquarters was established a hundred and forty miles past Julesburg, in Cheyenne, thirty miles beyond the Nebraska borders. If the winter did not sweep down too suddenly, it was hoped that the rails would reach Cheyenne that year. Grading crews were already working west of Cheyenne.

It was late September when Johnny Welker rode his gaunt Indian pony into Cheyenne City. He was as lean and gaunt as his horse. His shirt and trousers were ragged and torn, and he had not eaten in two days. He slumped wearily in the saddle as he rode down the long street fronting the graded embankment on which rails would soon be laid.

North Platte had been a wild camp, Julesburg had been raw and roaring, but Cheyenne gave promise of surpassing them both. A dozen tent saloons were already built along the

street. Three or four had huge tents adjoining for dancing and other amusements. The brothels of the East and the West had been scoured for the dregs of womanhood, who were ensconced in a dozen places in Cheyenne. Dance-hall girls had come from a thousand miles away to reap the golden harvest along the Union Pacific.

There was more whiskey than water in Cheyenne.

Johnny Welker tied his pony to a hitchrail in front of a tent restaurant and dug deep into his pockets to see if he had any of the metal that was used as currency in the land of the white people. He'd had no occasion to use any of it during the spring and summer traveling through the Indian country.

He found a worn quarter and a blackened half dollar and holding them in his hand went into the restaurant. A crudely scrawled sign met his eye: *Meals, $1.00.* He blinked, shook his head and turned away. A man came up behind him and said softly, "Johnny Welker!"

It was Cass Porter.

He was wearing Levis and a flannel shirt, boots and a flat-crowned black Stetson hat. A revolver swung low in a holster at his right thigh.

"What kept you? I expected you to show up here long ago."

"I've been moving around."

"Chasing the Sioux?" Porter smiled thinly. "I heard that you went after them, east of Ogallala."

Johnny made a small gesture which clinked the coins in his hand. "I wasted the summer."

His eyes on Johnny's fist clutching the money, Porter said, "I was just going to have something to eat. Join me."

"I'm not hungry."

"I'll bet you haven't eaten since yesterday."

"All right," said Johnny. "I haven't eaten since the day before." He opened up his hand. "But the prices here are too high. I've got to find a cheaper place to eat."

"Don't pay any attention to that sign. That's for the Irishmen on payday. Fifty cents will buy you all you can eat, every day except payday."

He inclined his head toward a long table made of undressed lumber. Johnny followed and a man came up.

"Two fifty-cent dinners," Porter said, looking hard at the waiter.

"Yes, *sir,* Mr. Porter!"

The waiter went off and Porter said quietly, "You want a job, Johnny?"

"I don't think the railroad will want me after I ran out on them."

"You mean after the Indian attack? I guess you haven't been around since that time."

"I haven't."

"Then you'd better go and have a talk with Nicholson."

"He's here?"

"Where else? But he isn't the timekeeper any more. He's been promoted, in charge of maintenance. My boss."

"*You're* working for the railroad?" Johnny asked in surprise.

Porter grinned. "I've been working for the U.P. since early 'sixty-six. I was drawing pay even last winter in North Platte." He shrugged. "That was part of the job, playing cards—listening—I knew about Wallington and Mullaney last winter."

Cass Porter was looking straight ahead, apparently oblivious that Johnny had turned and fixed his eyes on him. He went on, "I lost their trail two months before I came to North Platte."

"So Mullaney was the other man," Johnny said slowly.

Porter finally turned to meet Johnny's gaze. "Did you catch up to them? I suspected that was why you left the wagon train. Jack Merry reported that a couple of white men were with the Sioux who attacked the train."

Johnny nodded. "I trailed them to an Indian camp. I—I got Wallington, but I'm not sure about Mullaney."

"No. He showed up at Julesburg in July, but he was gone before I got there."

"Where's he now?" Johnny asked tautly.

"Wherever there's devilment. But he's quit selling rifles to the Indians."

"Then he'll be somewhere along the railroad."

"I suppose so, but it's five hundred and seventeen miles from here to Omaha, and they're grading between here and Fort Laramie."

"He'll come to Cheyenne!" exclaimed Johnny.

"That's quite possible. Cheyenne will be winter headquarters and"—Porter gestured toward the street—"this'll be North Platte, Julesburg and—and Hell, all rolled into one." He shook his head. "The job's too big for me."

Johnny looked at him inquiringly.

Porter smiled wanly. "That's my job. Taking care of the trouble."

The waiter brought two huge beefsteaks on tin platters, a half loaf of bread and two big mugs of black coffee. "No milk," he said. "Can't seem to keep enough on hand."

"I like my coffee without milk," said Porter, "and I imagine Johnny hasn't been drinking much milk lately."

"Or coffee," Johnny said shortly.

Porter looked hard at the waiter again and plunked a half dollar on the table. "Here's my money, Luke."

"Sure, thanks, yes, *sir!*"

Johnny tossed his half dollar on the table and the waiter picked it up and went off. Then Johnny said quietly, "You know—why I've got to get Mullaney?"

"Yes, Johnny," Porter said softly. "I know."

A man came into the tent, looked around and saw Porter. He came over quickly. "Mr. Porter, Nicholson says he'd like to see you right away."

"Important?"

"He says yes."

Porter pushed away his untouched steak. "Wait here, Johnny. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He got up and left the tent. Johnny pitched into the food and wolfed it down. The waiter came along. "Where's Mr. Porter?"

"He got called away," Johnny said.

"And his steak's got cold! Eat it and I'll make him another when he comes back."

"No."

"Then I guess I'll have to throw it away."

Johnny got up.

"Don't be a fool," snapped the waiter. "Eat it."

Johnny went outside.

Ten minutes later Cass Porter returned. He pointed up the street. "That's Nicholson's office, the wooden shack between the two tents. He's got a job for you."

"You asked him to give it to me?"

"No, I merely said you were in town." Porter's mouth twisted. "You're too touchy. The company *owes* you a job. Go see Nicholson."

Nicholson now had three clerks in the front office, but he occupied a room alone. He nodded as Johnny entered. "Hello, Johnny," he said quietly. "Ready to go back to work?"

"If you've a job for me, Mr. Nicholson."

"You've never been off the payroll. There's about six months' pay waiting for you."

"I don't take charity!"

"Charity? You get rid of a man who sold guns to the Indians and you call that charity? And what about that fight between North Platte and Ogallala? Do you think the company should have cut off your pay the minute the fight was over?" He shook his head. "The company *owes* you the money."

Johnny regarded Nicholson steadily, then exhaled lightly. "I guess you mean that, Mr. Nicholson."

"I do. And now, I think you'd better go and find Cass Porter. He wants you to go with him."

"But what about the job?"

"That's it. Porter needs a man to help him."

Johnny found Cass Porter at the company commissary, examining a repeating rifle. He handed it to Johnny. "You may need this."

"Where are we going?"

"Out to Five Mile Camp."

"Indians?"

"Not this time." Porter grinned at Johnny. "Ever play poker?"

"No, but I watched a lot of it last winter."

"You can watch some more." Porter gestured in a general way, which was intended to include all of Cheyenne. "But that's all you'll do—watch."

"Don't you think I'm old enough to play?"

Porter grunted. "My dad taught me poker before I was ten years old. But there's poker *and* poker. You watch today."

They were riding out of Cheyenne before Cass Porter amplified his remarks about poker. "Most people think poker's a game of chance and with most people it is, but with some it's a game of skill. And I don't mean knowing how to play the cards that are dealt to you. Couple fellows out here have just about cleaned out Five Mile Camp." He shook his head. "We can't keep the graders from gambling, of course, but we can see that they're not robbed."

"Don't the places in Cheyenne rob them?"

"Most of them do. But those are cash games. If a man's got money he can come into town and play, but out here they're playing for credit—against their wages. That means when payday comes there's no money to send home to the families."

They reached Five Mile Camp around suppertime, but a card game was already going on in front of the tents. A blanket had been spread out on the ground and seven men were in the game. Five were obviously graders. The other two wore rough clothing. One was in shirt sleeves, but his hands were free of calluses. The seventh man, whose hands were remarkably soft and smooth, wore a rough coat.

Cass Porter and Johnny dismounted some distance from the card game and strolled over to it. "I know one of those

fellows," Porter said to Johnny. "His name's Rodebaugh, and he's worked the line from Omaha to Cheyenne."

They approached the card game and stopped to watch. Porter chanced to stop behind the man wearing the coat. The gambler looked over his shoulder.

"I'm superstitious, pardner," he said. "Don't like anyone looking over my shoulder."

Porter shrugged and moved aside a few feet. A hand was played, which Rodebaugh won. One of the Irishmen, who had bet heavily, threw in his cards. "This cleans me again." He looked at Rodebaugh. "Can you give me another twenty?"

Rodebaugh coolly reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a sheaf of paper slips. He riffled through them and finally shook his head. "Sorry, Callahan," he said, "I've already got your tickets for a whole month's pay."

"Just ten dollars more," pleaded the Irishman.

"No," Rodebaugh said bluntly.

Callahan sprang to his feet. "Damn you for a——" He stopped as Rodebaugh's hand dropped to the blanket, just inches from the revolver in his holster.

"Mind if I sit in?" Porter asked.

"It's an open game," said the man with the coat.

"Wait a minute," protested Rodebaugh. "I happen to know this man. He's Cass Porter."

"My money's still good," said Porter. He dropped to his knees in the place vacated by Callahan.

Rodebaugh glowered at him. "You're a company man," he accused.

"So's every working man around here," retorted Porter. "Except maybe you and your friend."

"Let him play," cried a grader.

The two gamblers exchanged glances, then Rodebaugh shrugged. "Let's see the color of your money."

Porter brought out a handful of coins, mostly gold. He added a sheaf of greenbacks. "Enough?"

Rodebaugh grabbed up the cards and began to shuffle them. He would have dealt, but Porter stopped him. "I'd like a cut."

Rodebaugh slammed down the cards. "Cut, then!"

Porter not only cut the cards, but shuffled them before returning the pack to Rodebaugh.

The stakes were high, considering that these men earned only around fifty dollars a month. A grader opened for a dollar, was raised a dollar by another man. Then it was the turn of the man with the coat.

"Poker's going up," he said. "I raise two dollars."

One man dropped out, but all the others called. One man

drew one card, cursed as he looked at it and threw his hand into the discards. All of the others drew two cards, until it came to the turn of the gambler who had raised the pot two dollars. Rodebaugh looked at him inquiringly.

"Egan?"

The man called Egan studied his hand, then nodded. "Two."

Rodebaugh dealt him two cards, and Egan put down his discards. He did not throw them down. He put them down beside the cards already discarded and Johnny, who was watching at the moment, gave a start. Egan's hand had flickered over the discards and one somehow flicked up into his palm.

He riffled his cards together, squeezed them and edged them apart, a quarter of an inch or so.

The grader who had opened the pot studied his hand, then counted out five dollars. The man next to him threw in his hand. Porter, who was next, called the five-dollar bet.

Egan was next. "Well," he said, "I had the best hand going in and I still think I've got it."

"You picked up a card from the discards," Johnny blurted out.

Egan jerked around. "What's that?"

"I saw you myself," snapped Cass Porter. "You've got six cards in your hands right now."

An Irishman let out a roar. "Let me see that hand . . ."

He lunged for Egan's hand, but the gambler jerked away and leaped to his feet. His eyes, blazing, settled upon Johnny. "You young squirt, I'll teach you to . . ."

He took a step toward Johnny.

Johnny held his ground, his eyes on the gambler's hands. The left contained the cards, the right was empty. Egan was apparently unarmed.

"Look out, Johnny," warned Cass Porter suddenly. "He's got a sleeve gun."

Egan's right hand darted out, pointing at Johnny Welker. A derringer snapped from his sleeve into his palm. This was something Johnny had never faced. The first part of Cass Porter's warning had alerted him, but he had waited for a draw, possibly under Egan's coat. And instead Egan's hand had simply darted out empty—and then it wasn't empty.

The derringer barked and the .41 slug tore into Johnny's shoulder. The force of the bullet turned him almost completely around. His hand went automatically to his gun, but somehow Johnny found himself falling. He heard an explosion, then another as he hit the ground.

Cass Porter leaped across the blanket, dropping to his knees beside Johnny.

"He got you," he cried. "I should have told you about sleeve guns before." He tore open Johnny's shirt, exclaimed in relief. "It's not too bad," he said.

Both of the gamblers were down, Egan already dead and Rodebaugh dying. An Irishman tore Rodebaugh's shirt pocket and came up with the fistful of I O U's.

"He won't be collecting on these," he cried. He ripped the slips into shreds and scattered them.

13

Cass Porter drove Johnny back to Cheyenne in one of the company wagons. By the time the company doctor examined him in the tent hospital, Johnny had lost a great deal of blood and by midnight he was delirious.

The second day his temperature went down and during the afternoon the male nurse stopped at Johnny's cot. "Feel like a visitor?"

Johnny, believing the visitor was Cass Porter, nodded, but he winced a few moments later when flying feet came rushing toward his bed.

It was Ellen Bayliss.

"Oh, Johnny," she cried, "I heard you'd been shot, but they wouldn't let me see you until now."

She threw herself onto the cot, clasped his head in her young strong arms and kissed him. Johnny tried to wrench away from her and felt his wound burst open. Fortunately, the male nurse had followed Ellen and tore her away from Johnny.

"Here, young lady," he cried, "you can't do that!"

"Why not?" demanded Ellen. "He saved my life last spring and I haven't seen him since."

"He's too sick for excitement," the nurse said angrily. "If I'd known you were going to behave like this, I wouldn't have let you in at all. You'll have to go now."

"I won't go," Ellen declared petulantly. "You can't make me go!"

"We'll see about that." The nurse took Ellen's arm, but she promptly kicked his shin.

"I'll tell my dad," Ellen cried. "He'll fire you. Johnny, tell him who my father is."

"I don't care if your father's General Dodge," said the nurse grimly. "I'm responsible for this patient and you'll have to leave."

"Do what he tells you," Johnny ordered.

Ellen surrendered. "All right, I'll go if I have to, but I'm going to ask Dad if you can't come to our place. I'll nurse you."

"No," said Johnny quickly. "I prefer to stay here."

"We'll see about that," Ellen said. She threw a kiss at Johnny and walked off with great dignity.

An hour later, Hugh Bayliss appeared before Johnny's bed. His greeting was considerably less cordial than his daughter's. "I suppose I should say that I'm sorry to see you like this," he said grimly, "but I've been told that you provoked the fight." He made an impatient gesture. "I suppose the men were being cheated, but you were with Cass Porter and I don't approve of him any more than I do of you. He's a gun fighter and——"

"Mr. Bayliss," said Johnny wearily, "let me alone."

Bayliss scowled. "How can I let you alone with that girl of mine harping at me about you all the time? She wants me to have you moved over to our quarters."

"I want to stay here! I told her that."

"She says you saved her life when—when my wife was killed. Perhaps you did." He paused, then added stiffly, "If so, I owe you my thanks. But the fact remains that you're a professional gun fighter. I can't let my daughter idolize a—a killer."

"I told you once before," Johnny cried; "keep her away from me!"

A gleam came into Bayliss's eyes. "I'm going to do just that." He turned and walked off.

Later, Bayliss talked to Nicholson. "The California stage comes through tomorrow. I'm putting Ellen on it. Her aunt, on her mother's side, lives near Sacramento; she wrote me last month, offering to take care of Ellen."

"Does Ellen know you're sending her to California?" Nicholson asked quietly.

"I'm going to tell her tonight." A frown creased Bayliss's forehead. "She won't like it, but she's got to go." He hesitated.

"She's just thirteen and I know that's too young, but——"

"She's in love with young Welker?"

"She's infatuated with him, yes. I've tried to convince her that he's utterly worthless, but the more I talk the more she defends him. Now she insists that he tried to save her mother's life, too."

"You heard what the sergeant in command of those troopers said."

Bayliss gestured impatiently. "He's only one man—boy, rather. If Welker killed so many Indians, the soldiers didn't kill any of them." He regarded Nicholson sourly. "*You're* always defending him, too."

"Yes," Nicholson admitted soberly, "I guess I am. I don't think the true story of Johnny Welker's come out yet. You won't get it from the boy himself. He was only fourteen when those men killed his father and mother before him."

"Ellen saw *her* mother killed!"

"Yes, but I don't think you can compare the two. One was an attack by Indians—a pitched battle——"

"A massacre!"

"They were able to fight back. That's *some*thing. But Johnny . . ."

Bayliss exclaimed angrily and whirling, walked out of Nicholson's office. Nicholson looked after him soberly for a moment, then got up and went down to the tent hospital to visit Johnny Welker.

He found him sitting up in bed, snapping the trigger of his Navy Colt.

14

The trains never stopped running throughout the winter of 1867-1868. Cheyenne was railhead and the Union Pacific Company, with most of its financial problems solved through the aid of the government, was preparing for its plunge across Wyoming Territory.

Trainloads of rails reached Cheyenne. Flatcars loaded with ties came in daily. Equipment came. Huge girders made to specifications rolled into Cheyenne and were welded to other

girders and ironwork and put aside for further shipment in the spring and summer, when they would become bridges and trestles to span creeks and rivers. Mountains of supplies were stacked along the railroad tracks. No track was laid when the ground was frozen, but Cheyenne was a busy place. There were many workers on the winter payroll and the evenings were long. The saloons and honky-tonks did a thriving business.

Late in December, Nicholson came into a saloon where Johnny Welker sat near the sheet-iron stove. "Here you are," he exclaimed as he unbuttoned his sheepskin-lined overcoat. "Here's a letter for you, came yesterday."

Johnny stared at the letter, then opened it. It was from Ellen Bayliss. She wrote:

> Dear Johnny:
>
> I guess you know that I'm in California. I'm visiting my aunt Julia, who has a ranch, where they raise oranges and grapes and all sorts of fruit. This is December, and it is almost as warm as it is in Wyoming in July. My aunt is very nice and I like it here, but I miss my daddy and I think about you a lot. You're the only real friend I have in the East and I wish . . .

That was as far as Johnny read. He got up and opening the stove, tossed the letter inside.

Nicholson watched him sharply. "Bad news?"

"No. It—it was nothing."

Nicholson began to button up his coat. "Well, back to work, I guess." He went out and Johnny leaned back in his chair and stared at the cherry-red sheet-iron stove.

15

Once more, the rails moved west. Four rails a minute, five miles a day on the flat country, three miles a day on the mountain grades. The tents moved with the rails, sometimes ahead of them, sometimes remaining behind them for a few days. Laramie had its moment, then Rawlins and Rock Springs.

And then came Benton. Benton was North Platte, Julesburg and Cheyenne—and more. It was eight hundred miles from Omaha, and it would be the last big tent city of the Union Pacific. The vultures intended to gorge themselves.

Benton had twice as many saloons as Cheyenne, twice as many gamblers, twice as many easy women—and twice as many deaths.

Johnny Welker would remember Benton. One day in late June, Cass Porter sought him out. "We've got to earn our pay today. Some whiskey sellers have moved into the grading camps, and three or four of the camps have practically stopped work."

Five miles out of Benton, a dozen road scrapers were scattered along the right of way. Horses, in harness, grazed on the short buffalo grass. A single scraper was working, one man holding the scraper, another driving the team of horses. Under a scrawny cottonwood a dozen workmen were having themselves a little party. An empty whiskey jug lay on its side and another jug was being passed around.

A very bad quartet was singing "Buffalo Gals," and an Irishman was doing a jig.

Cass Porter and Johnny Welker rode up.

"Howdy, boys," Porter called.

"Howdy yourself," retorted one of the men.

"Step down and have a drink," invited another.

Porter shook his head. "This time of the day?"

"Any time's a good time for a drink," chortled one of the graders.

Porter dismounted. "Not during working hours." A half smile on his lips, he went toward the group.

Johnny Welker drew his revolver and pointed carelessly at the tree under which the graders were carousing.

Still smiling, Porter walked up. He held out his hand to the man with the jug. "Let's have that."

Disarmed by the smile, or because he wanted to be sociable, the man handed the whiskey jug to Porter. Porter smashed it on the hard ground.

A roar went up and the graders sprang to their feet, ready to annihilate Cass Porter.

Johnny fired into the branches of the cottonwood. The graders halted in their tracks.

"Where'd you get this whiskey?" Porter demanded.

The men, cowed by the shot and noting the gun at Porter's thigh, looked at one another uneasily. Then one of the bolder, or perhaps he was one of the drunker, stepped forward. "That's none of your damn business!"

"I'm making it my business," snapped Porter. "This gang hasn't done enough work today to pay for its drinking water. You know the rules about drinking on the job."

"And who're you to be comin' around here, givin' orders?" demanded the bolder, or drunker, grader.

"He's Cass Porter!" cried one of the others.

"Cass Porter, or Gen'ral Grant, they don't mean nothin' to me. A man breaks my whiskey jug has got to fight me." The grader raised his big fists and advanced on Cass Porter.

Cass Porter's half smile became wider. "Well, if it's fight you want . . ." He suddenly sprang forward and smashed the grader a terrific blow that felled him.

He looked down at the fallen man, nudged him with the toe of his boot. The man lay still.

That was something the graders could understand; a man who could drop one of their own bullies with a single punch was a man to respect.

One of the men said, "Some spalpeens down at Twenty Mile have set up a wagonload of whiskey."

Porter nodded. "Save your drinking for payday hereafter. Now get back to work and sweat the booze out of your systems."

He walked back to his horse and mounted. Before he and Johnny had gone fifty yards, the graders were rounding up their work horses.

Five miles beyond, Johnny and Porter came upon another crew that was doing very little work, but before either of the two could dismount a cavalcade rode up. At the head was Hugh Bayliss.

"Here, Porter!" he called, while still at a distance. "I've been waiting for you. There's trouble at Twenty Mile." Then he came up and his eyes went to Johnny.

Johnny said, "How are you, Mr. Bayliss?"

Bayliss frowned. "Oh, it's you! Well, I guess this work is in your line." He turned to Cass Porter. "A gang's brought in a load of whiskey. They killed Moriarty when he tried to drive them away."

"At Twenty Mile?" asked Porter.

"That's where they've got the wagon, but they've been selling whiskey up and down the line." Bayliss gestured to the grading crew near by. "Half of these men are drunk right now."

"They'll sober up." He picked up his reins. "Might as well ride to Twenty Mile."

"I'll go with you," cried Bayliss. He gestured to the cavalcade. "You go on to Benton."

He fell in behind Porter and rode with him. Johnny kept a short distance ahead. The three rode at a swift trot most of the way to Twenty Mile, where the roadbed ended and a considerable camp had been set up.

They passed several small crews of men and a good many wagons pulling equipment, but at Twenty Mile no one was working. A half-hundred men were gathered in the vicinity of a prairie schooner, which had its top down and was equipped with boards on three sides in lieu of a bar. There were a dozen kegs of whiskey in the wagon, two or three of them empty.

Johnny pulled up his horse as he approached to let Porter and Bayliss catch up. A sudden shout went up as someone recognized Hugh Bayliss.

"The boss' come back!" someone cried.

There was a scattering around the whiskey wagon, and Johnny could see that there were three men in the wagon. His eyes fell upon them and shock jolted him.

One of the men was Mullaney!

He dismounted. Porter rode up beside him. "Careful, Johnny!"

"The big man's Mullaney," Johnny said tonelessly.

Porter dismounted quickly. "All the more reason"—he gripped Johnny's arm—"let me handle this. We don't know how many will side with them."

Johnny jerked his hand free of Porter's grip. Porter whirled back to his horse and whipped his Winchester out of the saddle boot. Grimly he strode after Johnny, suddenly quickening his steps as he passed him.

"All right," he yelled when still some distance from the whiskey wagon. "You can hitch up your horses and clear out of here. You're through selling whiskey."

Mullaney, who seemed to be the leader of the whiskey sellers, caught up a short-barreled shotgun and laid the barrel over a keg of whiskey.

"Give orders to your Irishmen," he sneered. "We don't work for the U.P."

Bayliss, hurrying up behind Johnny and Porter, cried out, "This is railroad property."

"When you got a railroad here," retorted Mullaney. He made a quick gesture with the muzzle of the shotgun. "On'y I don't see no railroad." He pointed the muzzle of the shotgun squarely at Bayliss. "You got exactly one minute to clear out of here."

"Mullaney!"

That was Johnny's shout. He was leaning forward, bal-

anced on the balls of his feet. Both of his hands were chest high. Mullaney looked at him without recognition.

"You heard me, the bunch of you!"

"Remember Salt River!" cried Johnny.

"Salt Ri——" Mullaney's eyes widened in shock and sudden recognition. "The kid who killed Wall——"

He started to whip the shotgun over to blast at Johnny. Johnny's right hand streaked to his waist, jerked his gun out.

The bullet caught Mullaney in the forehead. The shotgun went up, pointed at the sky—and Johnny fired a second time.

Mullaney's dying finger pulled the trigger of the shotgun.

A gun behind Johnny roared, but for the moment he was not aware of it. Then Mullaney's friends were yelling and firing guns. Johnny heard a bullet strike something solid beside him. He fired at one of the men. Then, suddenly, there was no one to shoot at.

Behind Johnny, Hugh Bayliss was gasping, "My God!"

Johnny half turned and stiffened. Cass Porter was down on his knees, with one hand on the ground to keep himself from falling forward. Johnny started to stoop, but instinct caused him to whirl. The third and surviving whiskey seller, who had merely ducked behind the barrels, was peering out and throwing down on Johnny.

He whipped up his Navy gun, fired.

The whiskey seller cried out and pitched forward over the side of the wagon. His body turned a half somersault and he landed on his back.

Johnny ran forward. Mullaney was hanging forward, half over a barrel of whiskey. Johnny thrust his gun back under his waistband, caught hold of Mullaney to turn him over.

A groan came from him! He was alive.

Using both hands, Johnny jerked him out of the wagon to the ground. Mullaney landed on his face and Johnny turned him over.

Johnny's first bullet had struck him in the forehead, but, fired at an angle, it had been smashed sidewards by Mullaney's thick skull and cut a groove to the side of the head. The wound was an ugly one, but not necessarily fatal. Johnny's second bullet had caught Mullaney in the center of his chest, and it was probably from this wound that he was dying.

Johnny dropped to the ground beside Mullaney.

"Mullaney!" he cried. "Where's Ben Haskins?"

Mullaney's eyes, the left one bloodied, rolled and focused themselves upon Johnny. "You—you——!"

Johnny grabbed the man's shoulder, gripped it tight. "Where's Haskins?"

"You go—to—hell!"

Savagely, Johnny shook the dying man. "You're dying, Mullaney. You've got to tell me—where's Ben Haskins?"

Mullaney groaned. "Let me alone. . . . I'm hurt—bad!"

"I was hurt two years ago," snarled Johnny. "You shot me. You killed my mother and my father." Again he shook the dying man. "Talk, Mullaney, talk! Where's Ben Haskins? Where's the—the other man?"

Hugh Bayliss came up behind Johnny. "Johnny, Cass Porter's badly wounded. He wants you."

Johnny scarcely heard Bayliss. "Where's Haskins?" he cried to Mullaney.

Bayliss dropped his hand on Johnny's left shoulder, pulled on him. "Johnny—don't!"

Johnny whirled out from under Bayliss's hand and Bayliss, looking into his savage face, recoiled. "You've gone mad!" he cried.

"This is Mike Mullaney," snarled Johnny. "He shot me two years ago. I've got him now, and he's going to tell me where to find the other two."

"The man's dying; he's beyond talking."

"He'll talk!"

"But Cass Porter's badly hurt. *He* wants to talk to you."

"I can't now. I've got to . . ." He turned and in a frenzy shook Mullaney.

"What was the name of the fourth man?"

Bayliss said, "I was right to keep Ellen away from you. You're a killer—a killer, Johnny."

"D-don't," moaned Mullaney. "Let me—'lone. . . ." He was going fast. He wanted to die, but Johnny was preventing him.

"You'll tell me, Mullaney; you'll tell me, or——"

"Aw—right!" gasped Mullaney. "Ben went—California . . ."

"The fourth man?"

"He—he quit us. Said he didn't like what—what we did. He—I don't know. . . . I—I don't know. Ain't seen him in . . ."

"His name!"

"Shaw. . . . Shaw. . . . Harry Shaw. . . ."

Blood suddenly welled from Mullaney's mouth. A convulsion shook his body—and then he was dead.

For a long moment Johnny stared bitterly at the dead man. Then he rose to his feet and turned. Bayliss had left him, was kneeling beside Cass Porter, some yards away. Johnny walked over.

Bayliss looked up. "He's dead."

"Dead!"

Bayliss said softly, "Well, Johnny, what now?"

"There are two more of them," Johnny replied harshly. "Ben Haskins and Harry Shaw."

Bayliss got to his feet. "You'll get them. I'm sure you'll get them."

"I'll get them!" He walked to his horse, mounted and rode back toward Cheyenne.

Bayliss, watching, felt a slow chill seep through him, and after a moment he shuddered.

16

The rails reached Benton and the first train to roll into the depot carried the payroll for five thousand men. And then all work stopped. Whiskey flowed and blood was spilled.

Benton roared.

Johnny Welker, who had not worked for the railroad since the death of Cass Porter three months before, stood on the street on the evening of payday and listened to the noise of Benton. It was louder and more frenzied than he had ever known it, but he was impervious to it. He was alone when he rode the trails, and he was alone in the grading and track-laying camps. He was alone in Benton, in the midst of five thousand men trying to spend their money as quickly as possible, and a thousand vultures and leeches trying to take it away from them as quickly as possible.

The tent before which he stood was the biggest in town. The owner had come late to Benton and had to work fast. Johnny had never been in it, but he made the rounds of them all sooner or later and after a while he drew a weary breath and went inside.

A four-piece band blared music, loud and hideous, yet the noise of it was virtually drowned by the yipping and whooping of a hundred men, the bleating and screaming of two score women. There was dancing, if you could call it that. Wrestling was more like it: drunken, sweating, panting Irishmen wrestling with hot, painted and perspiring women.

There were bars down two sides of the big tent, and eight bartenders could scarcely keep up with the demands of the customers. In the far left corner was a small raised platform on which the band held forth. To the right was a wide entrance leading into another tent, just as large, but less noisy. Gambling was the lure in this second tent. There was faro and poker, twenty-one and dice, chuck-a-luck and even fantan, for the few Chinese coolies who had seeped across the plains from the Central Pacific to try their fortunes on the Union Pacific.

Johnny Welker entered the dance tent and a girl swooped down on him.

"Dance with me, honey," she chanted. "Dance with me."

"I don't dance," he replied curtly.

"Then buy me a drink," she screamed, clutching at his arm. He gave her a shove, and she pounded him with her fists and called him dirty names.

A second girl bore down on him and repeated the dance and drink solicitations. When those brought no response, whispered to him. Welker passed on and she, too, cursed him for a cheap skate and worse.

A dancing couple collided with him so hard that they knocked him off balance. When he recovered, he went on. A pair of girls blocked his passage and he stepped around them. One clawed at his shirt.

"Wait a minute, honey," she screamed. "I want to talk to you. I can show you the best time in Wyoming."

A heavy-set woman, in a gown cut so low that it was barely able to contain huge breasts, blocked his path when he was only a yard or so from the entrance to the gambling tent. This was Vivian, who owned the establishment.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded truculently.

Johnny nodded to the doorway behind her, but she kept her blocking position.

"D'you think you're old enough?" she boomed. "The way you been brushin' my girls aside, I don't think you're dry behind the ears. I got the finest girls west of Chicago, but none of them's good enough for you."

Johnny tried to step past her, but she threw out a massive arm. "Answer me when I talk to you!"

His eyes met hers, and Vivian's mouth fell open. She took a half step back and awe spread over her face. Johnny went past her.

The woman half turned to a man watching her. A sudden

shudder ran through her. "Who—who was that?" she asked the man.

The man grinned icily. "That, lady, was Johnny Welker!"

"Johnny Welker, the—the murderer!"

The man shrugged. "*I* wouldn't call him that. I—I wouldn't call him anything. Not to his face."

"But he's only a boy—a—a child."

"Maybe so, but I wouldn't go against him with a gun for all the money they've spent on the Union Pacific. He's greased lightning with a gun and he'd as lief kill a man as step on a snake!"

Inside the big gambling tent, Johnny Welker made a big circle, weaving in and out among the tables and layouts, searching—searching the faces of the players. Here and there he stopped for a minute or two to watch a game, to study a face. Clothes changed the looks of a man, as did a mustache, a haircut and a different way of combing or parting the hair.

He listened for voices.

At a faro table, the dealer looked up and found Johnny's eyes on him. "Put down your money!" he snapped, then smiled mechanically and droned out the play of the cards: "Seven wins, ten loses. Place your bets, gentlemen."

Money was scattered upon the layout and the dealer played his cards. "Queen wins, the trey loses. Place your bets!" His eyes flickered again to Johnny. "If you're not going to play, move on. You're taking up room."

Two or three of the players glanced idly at Johnny and suddenly a hush fell upon the immediate area of the faro game. The dealer's voice cut the hush gratingly, "You're too damn young to be playing cards, anyway. Beat it."

"Make me," Johnny said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

A man darted along behind the table, thrust his head down to the dealer's and said hoarsely, "That's Johnny Welker!"

"I don't give a damn who it is," snarled the gambler. "He can't talk like that to——" Then he stopped. An ashen hue came over his face, and the smooth hands poised above the card case trembled.

"Go on," said Johnny. "I can't what?"

"Nothing," choked the gambler. "Nothing. I—I didn't mean it!"

Johnny walked away and the gambler whipped a handkerchief from his sleeve and pressed it to his mouth, feeling that any moment he might be sick.

Johnny made another half circle of the gambling tent, then

re-entered the dance tent. A girl whirled away from the arms of a drunken track-layer and came to a stop before him. She couldn't have been more than sixteen years of age. A half-shy, half-frightened look was in her eyes.

"Hello," she said to Johnny.

He stopped before her, hesitated, then said, "Hello."

"Would you—do you want to dance?" she asked, almost tremulously.

He shook his head.

"How about a drink?" She darted a quick look over her shoulder. "Please!"

"No," Johnny said, "I don't drink."

"I—I don't like it myself," the girl said. Then in a rush of words, "But I've got to. Vivian makes me. She—she hits me if I don't do the things—the things she wants me to do."

Vivian appeared between two dancing couples, saw Johnny and forced a broad smile over her big face. "Ah, here you are! I was hoping you two would find each other. Johnny, this is Kitty, the nicest little girl in the territory. Kitty, be nice to Johnny. Dance with him."

Johnny walked past Vivian. The big woman's face distorted in sudden rage. "What'd you say to him, you little——?" she cried, and struck Kitty a hard blow on the face with the palm of her meaty hand.

Johnny heard Vivian's words, heard the slap and Kitty's cry of pain and continued on. He threaded his way through the heaving, swirling dancers and went out of the tent.

The next day, shortly before noon, Johnny was standing near the Union Pacific commissary when Kitty came out of Vivian's tent enterprises. Her face was washed of powder and rouge, she was wearing a simple muslin dress, and she looked like a girl back in Illinois or Indiana on her way to choir practice.

She saw Johnny and started eagerly toward him. Before she reached him her steps faltered, but she forced a smile on her face and continued toward him.

"Hello, Johnny," she said as she came up.

He nodded. "Hello, Kitty."

"You remember my name?" she exclaimed in pleasure.

"Of course." He saw that her left cheek was slightly puffed where Vivian had struck her the evening before.

"I'm glad," Kitty said. "You d-don't hate me?"

"Why should I hate you?"

"Because of the work I do."

He shrugged. "Why don't you go home?"

She recoiled. "Home!"

"You've got a home somewheres, haven't you?"

"Sure," she said bitterly. "I've got a home. I've got a stepmother, too. A stepmother who nagged and whipped me until I couldn't stand it any more." She looked at him, her eyes almost pleading. "I—I know who you are, Johnny. I don't care. After the kind of men I've seen out here——" She stopped. "That isn't what I meant to say. I mean—I like you, Johnny. No matter. I've been thinking about you all night, and I hoped I'd see you today to tell you that—that I like you."

"Let me alone," Johnny said roughly.

She stared at him, and tears welled up in her eyes. Then she whirled away and started running.

Fifty feet from Johnny, a hulking, half-drunken spiker came out of a tent saloon.

"Hey!" he cried. "Look at this!"

Kitty stopped. She sent one wild look back at Johnny, then forced a smile to her face. "Hello," she said to the spiker, who was almost three times her age.

"Baby," chortled the spiker, "let's you and me go have us a drink."

Kitty took the big man's arm, and they went into the saloon from which the spiker had just reeled out.

17

The July 14, 1875, issue of *George Lester's Illustrated Weekly* carried an article entitled "Portrait of a Gun Fighter" that was well received by the magazine's one hundred and seventy-five thousand readers. Interest in the West was universal, and the author of the article was at his best when he wrote about the Western scene. He knew the West at first hand, for he had been one of the thirty selected newspaper and magazine correspondents who had been invited on the memorable Union Pacific junket, away back in 1868. The five shares of Union Pacific stock he had received on that occasion were still paying him a steady eight percent per annum.

The author wrote:

. . . We first saw Johnny Welker in Benton, Wyoming Territory. Today, Benton is but a name. The Wyoming sands have covered all traces of the place that was in 1868 the rawest, wildest boom town ever known in these United States. In 1868 it was railhead, a sprawling city of tents where they buried a man every hour on the hour—a man who died by violence. Sometimes it was a woman, a painted, tawdry woman of the canvas dens.

When our party visited Benton as the guests of the Union Pacific Railroad, there were already whispers about Johnny Welker. One of the stories about him, which we did not believe at the time, was that he had ridden into a hostile Sioux village in broad daylight to shoot down a renegade white man who was a mortal enemy.

And then we saw Johnny Welker! He was standing in front of The Irishman's Friend, one of the biggest of the canvas tent saloons which catered exclusively to the Irish graders and tracklayers. He was a mere youth, certainly no more than eighteen. He was tall and slender, almost six feet in height, but weighing no more than one hundred and fifty or possibly sixty. He wore a battered pair of cowboy boots, overalls without bib, or Levis as they are called in the West, a black woolen shirt and an ancient flat-crowned Stetson. Unlike all the other gunmen we have known, Johnny Welker carried no gun holster. His lethal weapon, a Navy Colt revolver, was thrust under his belt at the waist, an awkward position for a quick draw, one would believe, but it is the only way Welker ever carries his gun.

His face was a strong one, clean-shaven and very youthful, until one looked into his eyes. They were blue, an icy blue of such coldness that a man looking into them was appalled.

We talked to young Johnny Welker, the gun fighter. He was courteous enough, but his responses, when he made any at all, were monosyllabic. About himself he would not talk at all. We ventured to ask him if it was true that he had killed seven men, not counting Indians, and the look he gave us made us go quickly to another question. His story we pieced together from other sources. Some of it we obtained from officials of the railroad, for the young gun fighter was frequently in the hire of the railroad, in one capacity or another.

At the close of the war, according to the best report, Johnny Welker's father was the operator of a river ferry in eastern Nebraska. A band of border ruffians, who could not share in the general amnesty after the war because of their evil crimes, came up to the river crossing one day and in cold blood shot down Johnny Welker's father and mother and left Johnny, himself, for dead. As he lay weltering in his own blood, Johnny swore an oath of vengeance. He would never stop, he would never rest until he had killed every member of the infamous band.

A wandering trapper came along, found Johnny still alive and nursed him back to health. When he recovered, after a convalescence of almost a year, Johnny Welker set out upon the trail of vengeance.

He caught up with the first of the murderers soon after he took their trail. At that time Johnny Welker was no more than fifteen, yet he called out the ruffian, a man named Wallington, beat him to the draw and killed him.

From that day on, Johnny Welker has ridden the shadowy trails of the West. He has sought his quarry in Nebraska, in Dakota, in Wyoming. Wherever he has caught up with him, he has called him out—and killed him. How many of the original murdering band he has killed is not known, but when we first saw him in 1868 he was reputed to have already killed seven men, not counting Indians.

And that was seven years ago!

During the years the fame of Johnny Welker has increased. He is the most feared man west of the Mississippi. When he rides into a town, the local bad men leave at the other end. When he walks into a saloon, a sudden hush falls upon the place.

He has visited Abilene and Wichita, Dodge City and Ogallala. He has been to all the places where the famous marshals of the frontier rule their communities. He is known to the bad men, the James Boys, the Younger Brothers, but he does not ride with them. He is not an outlaw. There are no rewards for Johnny Welker. His killings have been fair, according to the Code of the West. He calls out his man and he gives him the advantage—he waits until the other man draws, and then he goes for his own Navy Colt—and always he beats his opponent to the draw. His speed with a gun, in spite of his unconventional draw, is devastating. . . .

There was more, much more to the article. It was a mixture of fact, legend and pure fantasy. The author, who had probably seen Johnny Welker only the one time, and at a distance, wrote as if he were a friend and confidante of the notorious gun fighter. But the readers did not know that.

And one reader of the article frowned as if in pain as she read it for the second time in the day coach of the crack Union Pacific train, as it roared over the western Nebraska prairie.

The train rolled eastward, from Ogallala, twenty miles, thirty—and the magazine lay on her lap as she stared through the window. Somewhere out there the Sioux had attacked the wagon train, back in 1867.

Out there Johnny Welker had tried to shield her body with his as the Indians thundered down upon them.

Out there, without even a cross to mark the spot, her mother was buried.

18

The conductor came into the coach. "North Platte," he called. "North Platte, next stop!"

Ellen Bayliss's mind came back to the present. She shook her head, drew a deep breath and got up. She started to reach to the rack overhead to take down her two bags, but the conductor sprang forward. "Let me take those!"

She was like that. She was twenty years old, but even middle-aged men looked at her thoughtfully—and sprang to help her when there was the least excuse. She was tall and slender, yet not too slender. Her features were finely chiseled, her complexion, normally smooth and white, was now lightly tanned. Her hair, once so light that it was almost tow-colored, had deepened somewhat and was now a pale gold.

The train was beginning to slacken speed as the conductor carried Ellen's bags to the vestibule. Swirling sand pelted them and the conductor whistled. "North Platte ain't Californy, Miss."

"I've been here before," Ellen replied.

"Then you shouldda known enough to stay away!"

The train pulled up before the depot. The conductor scrambled to the platform, dropped the footstool into place and turned to help Ellen down the steps. But she was already down them, flying into the arms of a gaunt, weak-chinned man of about forty-five.

"Uncle Arthur!" she cried. "It's so good to see you."

"Welcome home, Ellen," Arthur Bayliss said awkwardly. He released her and stepped back to look at her. "You've sure grown up. And California's been mighty good to you."

"I'm glad you said that," Ellen said, sobering. "About home. This *is* home to me. Mother—and Dad . . ."

Arthur Bayliss caressed her arm. "I know, Ellen, I know." He picked up her bags and started to carry them across the narrow platform to a buckboard.

A tall, well-built man about thirty who had been watching

Ellen and her uncle, suddenly moved forward to intercept them. "Here, let me help you, Mr. Bayliss," he volunteered and before the older man could protest took the bags from his hands.

"Oh, hello, Johnson," Bayliss said. "Ellen, this is one of our neighbors, Cliff Johnson."

Johnson's hands were gripping the bags so he was unable to doff his hat, but he bowed elaborately. "Mighty pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Bayliss. Your dad and me was friends and next-door neighbors. Only about eight miles apart," he grinned.

"I know," Ellen said. "He told me."

"I didn't know you'd visited here before."

"I haven't, not the ranch, I mean. But Dad wrote me all about it. About—everything."

"Ellen's been living in California," Bayliss explained. "An aunt, on her mother's side, has been taking care of her since she was eleven or twelve."

They had reached the buckboard by this time and Johnson dumped the bags into the back of it, behind the seat. He whirled quickly to help her into the wagon before her uncle could perform the service. He held on to her hand an instant longer than was necessary, grinning at her.

Ellen, her color a bit higher than normal, said, "You must come and visit us, Mr. Johnson."

"Don't worry about that, Miss Bayliss!" chuckled Cliff Johnson. "I'll be there before anyone else gets a glimpse of you." He winked at Arthur Bayliss. "You'll be seeing a lot of me around the H-B, Mr. Bayliss!"

Arthur Bayliss was not as pleased as Clifford Johnson. He nodded to the other man and climbed into the buckboard beside Ellen. He muttered under his breath as he turned the team away from the depot.

"Settle back," he said to Ellen. "It's eighteen miles out to the ranch."

"I didn't know North Platte was the closest town," Ellen said. "I somehow got the impression from Father that we were near a town called Buffalo Crossing."

"We are. Buffalo Crossing's only seven miles from our ranch house, but it's north of us and the train doesn't go anywhere near it. You'd have to take a stagecoach from North Platte, twenty-five miles north and west. I came in to North Platte to save you the trip on the stagecoach. Besides"—he paused—"I wanted to talk to you before we got to the ranch."

"All right," said Ellen. "I've tried not to think about it, even, but I can't dodge it any longer. I've got to face it. I'm

here—I'm seeing the people who knew him, who worked with him—and lived with him."

"Hugh was my brother," said Arthur Bayliss. "He was the smart one in our family. You might say we had the same chance and you'd be right. But Hugh was two years older than I was. When I got to college, he was the leader of his class. By the time I got out of college, he was already established with the New York Central. Sure, he got me a job with the N.Y.C., but I—I was just Hugh Bayliss's brother." He laid his hand on Ellen's. "Not that I minded, Ellen. I was always very proud of Hugh."

"So was I," Ellen said soberly. "And so was Mother. I was only eight or so when he was made a major on General Dodge's staff, but I remember hearing Mother tell her friends. She was so proud she—she cried."

Arthur Bayliss nodded. "I heard a fella say once that Hugh got his job with the U.P. just because he served under General Dodge during the war. But that's the way folks are—jealous. Hugh quit the U.P. in 'sixty-nine, right after they finished it. He went to ranching here, and I happen to know that he turned down all sorts of jobs on railroads. Why, only last year the Santa Fe people was after him to take a big job with them."

"He came here because of Mother," Ellen said. "She—she was killed between North Platte and Ogallala. I—I guess no one quite knows where, but I think——" She stopped.

Arthur Bayliss gave her a strange sideward look. "I thought you knew."

"I don't. Not for certain. I was only twelve at the time."

"That isn't what I meant. I thought you knew that your father found the grave where they—where they were all buried. That was only a little while after it happened. Later he—he had her moved." Ellen gasped. "Her grave's right behind the ranch house!"

19

The trail from Zeke's Store was a well-traveled one, more of a road than a trail, and two miles from the river it merged with a road that was so pounded from hoofs and wagon wheels that it was virtually a highway. At least for this section of Nebraska.

Johnny Welker traveled the road, his mind on that day nine years ago when he had gone in the other direction, toward the one-eyed storekeeper's place—the day he had killed his first man.

His horse, a powerful black gelding, moved along at a fast walk. Welker rode easily, giving the horse its head. His eyes were slitted, almost closed, but he missed nothing along the road. He noted the sod house on the right, the corral near it, the small herd of herefords.

A little farther on there was another house to the left, and a quarter mile beyond that, a frame house that had actually been painted.

Then suddenly he caught sight of the river and beyond it a cluster of buildings. A village.

He sat erect on the gelding as it plodded down to the ferry, now operated by a taut cable stretched across the river. The scow, a large one, was on the near side. A farm wagon, a horse and its rider were already on the boat as Welker came up.

"Hurry up, Stranger," the ferryman called as he saw Welker approach. "We're ready to go across."

Welker rode onto the boat and dismounted. "How much?"

"Two bits," was the reply.

Welker gave the man a quarter. Ferry rates were much cheaper than—than ten years before.

The boat began to move across the river, propelled smoothly by a winch operated by the ferryman. Welker stood by his gelding looking toward a point a quarter of a mile away, where the river made a sharp turn southward.

The bend of the Salt River.

The boat reached the other side and the ferryman let down the bars. The wagon moved off, then the other passenger. Welker was the last to leave. He looked out over the village which consisted of possibly fifteen or twenty buildings.

"What's the name of this place?" he asked.

The man looked at him in surprise. "Buffalo Crossing."

"It's a new town."

"Not so new. Been here seven-eight years. I been runnin' this boat back and forth for almost five years."

Welker nodded and turned to the shore. He led his gelding off the boat. The first building on the right, set back some fifty feet from the landing, was a large frame building. Across the top of it was a huge board sign, which read:

DEVLIN'S TAVERN
Jos. Devlin, Proprietor

A saloon on the spot where John Welker had once lived. And behind the saloon, a grave.

Two horses were tied to the hitchrail. Welker moved his own horse to within a half-dozen feet of the others and tied it to the rail. But he stood beside the horse a little while.

His hand fell lightly to the butt of the Navy Colt which he wore in a holster at his right side. He had adopted that six years ago when he had stopped using the name of Johnny Welker. That was shortly after he had left Promontory Point, in Utah Territory, where they had driven the golden spike that had linked the Union Pacific with the Central Pacific.

He had been there. He had watched the silk-hatted officials of the two railroads, the dignitaries of the East and the West; he had heard the speeches and he had seen the Vice-President of the United States swing the sledge that had driven the golden spike into the last tie of the rail.

He had seen it all and he had searched the crowd. He had scanned the faces, the ones under the silk hats, the dirty ones of the Irish paddies, the gaunt faces of the gamblers, the bleary-eyed ones of the roustabouts, the toughs, the riffraff who had followed the Union Pacific across the plains and the mountains, the men who had cheated and robbed and murdered—the men who had lived off the sweat of the workers.

That was 1869. And now it was 1875, and Johnny Welker was twenty-four years old and looked thirty. Six years had gone by, and he had not found Ben Haskins or Harry Shaw.

He had crossed the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific. From Omaha to San Francisco. Back and forth. By train. By

horse. He had stopped at every town and village and hamlet along the two-thousand-mile span of glistening rails. Wherever men had congregated he had gone. He had looked at faces and he had asked questions.

He had traveled the Santa Fe from Kansas City to Topeka, to Abilene and Wichita, Ellsworth and Dodge. He had gone down the Chisholm Trail, and he had come up the Chisholm Trail.

He had visited the mining camps in Wyoming, in Idaho and Montana. Whenever a new one sprung up, wherever there was a boom, there he had gone.

The years had dragged on and now he was back where he had started. At Salt River. Only now there was a town here, a town that they called Buffalo Crossing, for no reason that he could think of, for very few buffalo had crossed the river here back in '65.

He went into Devlin's Saloon.

Two men stood at the near end of the bar dawdling over their drinks. A bartender polished glasses and a stocky man with graying hair played solitaire at a table.

Welker passed the two men at the bar and moved down to the far end. The bartender came over.

"Beer."

The bartender stopped his polishing and drew a glass of beer. He brought it to Welker and waited. Welker put a quarter on the bar. The man brought no change. The price of beer in Buffalo Crossing was high.

Johnny sipped at the beer. It was tasteless but cold. It quenched thirst. So did the water in Salt River.

The solitaire player looked at Welker thoughtfully, played a few cards, then got up and crossed to the bar.

"Have another beer, Stranger?" he said, noting that Welker's glass was almost empty.

"This is enough," Welker replied shortly.

"I meant on the house." The man smiled. "I'm Joe Devlin."

Welker finished the beer and set down the empty glass.

Devlin said, "Your first visit to Buffalo Crossing?"

"I've been here before."

"Must have been before my time. I seldom forget faces. I've been here since 'seventy. The only thing here then was the ferry and Ward's Trading Post. Then Bayliss brought in his herd and things began to pick up."

"Bayliss?" Welker asked quietly.

"Sure, this was Bayliss's town. The biggest rancher in the state."

"Bayliss," said Welker. "The name is familiar."

"You *are* a stranger, Mister," exclaimed Devlin. "The name Bayliss is known all over the West. He's the man who built the Union Pacific, then settled down here to build a ranch running thirty thousand head of cattle. And the way he was going he'd have probably made it fifty thousand."

"Why'd he stop?"

"A man usually stops when he dies."

Welker started to turn away. Devlin said, "Looking for work?"

Welker turned back. "No."

Devlin shrugged. "I just thought I'd mention it if you were. Two-three of the ranches are hiring men. Paying top wages."

"What do they call top wages around here?"

"Forty dollars." Devlin paused a moment. "I guess a real good man could get up to a hundred a month." He looked down at the gun in Welker's holster. "I happen to know that Norton's looking for a couple of hundred-dollar-a-month men."

Welker asked, "Is there a restaurant in town?"

"Next door, but one. Good eating place."

Welker nodded and walked to the door. Devlin watched him, a frown on his face.

Outside Welker stood for a moment looking at his horse.

Hugh Bayliss.

Welker had seen him at Promontory Point. He had been wearing a silk hat that day and when it was over, he had stopped Welker as he was going to his horse.

"The work's finished," he had said. "They don't need me any more." And then, when Welker had made no reply, he had added with a harshness in his voice, "They don't need the Johnny Welkers any more either."

That was the last time Welker had seen him.

But he had come here to Salt River. Why?

Then Welker remembered. It was not so many miles from Salt River to North Platte, to Ogallala. Between those railroad camps the Sioux had attacked the wagon train. Yes, of course, the place held memories for Hugh Bayliss.

Memories.

Welker walked to the restaurant and ordered a meal of beefsteak and potatoes. He did not ask for it, but the waitress also placed a wedge of apple pie before him and he ate it. When he finished eating, he put a silver dollar on the counter and went out.

He walked back to his horse and mounted it. Across the street, a girl came out of Ward's Store, carrying two large bags. She took them to a buckboard and climbed into it.

Welker rode his horse out of Buffalo Crossing at a walk. He heard the clatter of wheels behind him, but did not turn. A buckboard pulled up to him, and the girl he had seen at the store smiled brightly at him.

"Hello," she said.

He nodded shortly.

Her team was trotting, but she pulled it up so that the horses kept pace with Welker's gelding.

"It's a warm day," she remarked conversationally.

"It's August," replied Welker.

"Meaning that it's always hot in August," Ellen Bayliss said, unrebuffed. She still smiled. "I'm just making conversation. Your face seems familiar, but I can't quite place it. You —you work for Cliff Johnson?"

"No."

Then Welker looked at her. Pale golden hair. Could it have been a light blonde—what was it—nine years ago?

She was still talking. "I've met so many new people in the last four months. I remember the faces, but I miss the names. I'm Ellen Bayliss."

He had to make some reply to that. He said, "How do you do?"

She looked at him, now puzzled. "We *haven't* met before?"

"I never heard of Buffalo Crossing until today," Welker said carefully.

"Then I couldn't have seen you here."

He shook his head.

Her smooth forehead creased. She let out the horses and the buckboard rolled past Welker. Fifty yards past him, she turned and looked back, but Welker had dropped his eyes to the road and did not meet hers.

The road turned a short distance ahead and the buckboard rolled around the turn, out of sight. Welker rode a few yards farther, then pulled up the gelding. After a moment or two he dismounted, but stood by the gelding for several minutes.

Then he remounted and rode back to Buffalo Crossing.

20

Welker ordered a glass of beer at the bar and when it was brought, carried the glass to a table against the wall. He sat with his back to the wall and sipped at the beer. He leaned back, watching the people who came into the saloon and went out again.

Devlin came out of his office at the rear of the saloon and glanced thoughtfully at Welker, then went on about his business. Customers came in more frequently as the afternoon wore on, and some of them stayed to have more than a casual drink or two.

A poker game started up.

About six o'clock, Welker got up and went out. He returned to the restaurant where he had eaten earlier. The place was empty and he had to wait for several minutes before a waitress came out of the kitchen. She was a rather plump girl, quite young. Her eyes were red and it was apparent that she had been crying.

"Excuse me," she said. "I didn't know there was anyone here." Her mouth trembled and she was obviously on the verge of again bursting into tears.

Welker ordered quickly. "Steak, potatoes, whatever you've got in the place. And some coffee."

The girl went into the kitchen and after a moment Welker heard sobbing, then a different girl's voice. Welker was of half a mind to leave, but then the girl who had served him at lunch came in. She was older than the weeping waitress by two or three years.

"I'm sorry," she said, "could I have your order?"

"I just gave it to the other girl."

"I know, but she—she forgot. She isn't feeling well."

"Steak, potatoes. Coffee."

"Thank you. I'll have it ready in a jiffy."

She went off and Welker could hear her bustling around in the kitchen. In a little while she brought a platter with a crisp

steak, some beans, potatoes. She set the food down before Welker and got a cup of coffee.

The girl remained in the restaurant, but sent a worried look now and then in the direction of the kitchen. Finally, when Welker finished his steak, she brought him a piece of apple pie. "There's no charge for this."

"You gave me a piece this afternoon."

She smiled wanly. "I know. You—you're new in town, aren't you?"

"I can still pay for my food."

The girl winced at Welker's rebuff. "I'm sorry. That'll be ninety cents then, a dollar with the pie."

It wasn't worth discussing, but the girl remained near by. Welker, eating the pie, looked up and caught her eyes on him. "I didn't mean to stare," she said, "but you look like someone I once knew—a long time ago."

"You're not that old!"

"Oh, this was when I was a little girl. He—this boy that you look like used to take me to school."

For just a second, Welker's eyes became mere slits, but then he relaxed. He got up and dropped a dollar on the counter. Nodding, he went out of the restaurant.

Returning to the saloon he found his chair still vacant and occupied it, but he did not bother to get another glass of beer. There were now ten or twelve customers in the place, five of them in a noisy poker game not too far from Welker.

Joe Devlin was watching the poker game, but when Welker sat down he came over. "Change your mind about staying here?"

"I haven't made up my mind either way," replied Welker.

"I've got some rooms upstairs that I rent out."

"I don't want a room."

Devlin smiled sardonically. "It's the badge makes me nosy." He reached into a vest pocket and brought out a nickel-plated badge. "I don't bother to wear it because everybody around here knows I'm the deputy sheriff. On the side, that is. Place ain't big enough to pay a full-time deputy." He dropped the badge back into his pocket. "I suppose I could ask you your name."

"You could," Welker said shortly.

"Jones? Brown? Johnson?"

"Try Smith."

"All right, Smith. It's an easy name to remember." He stopped, a frown suddenly coming over his features.

A man had come into the saloon, a heavy-set man in his

mid-forties. He stood inside the door a moment, searching the room. Then his eyes fell upon the five men playing cards. He came forward.

Devlin muttered under his breath, "The damn fool!"

The man reached the card table. "Norton," he said loudly, "I want to talk to you."

A well-built, hard-faced man in his early thirties, regarded the older man coolly. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You're only playing cards."

The man called Norton counted out money and threw it into the pot. "I raise it ten." Then he made an impatient gesture to the man across the table. "Later, Hutch."

It was then that Welker half turned in his chair to look at the man standing over the card table.

Hutch? Yes, it was Hutch Thompson, the man who had found Johnny Welker ten years before lying half dead within yards of where he now sat. The man who had nursed him to health, who had taken him to his home and tried to raise him as his own son. And the girl up the street, in the restaurant, who had half remembered Johnny Welker, was Hutch Thompson's daughter.

A few feet away, Hutch Thompson cried out, "I want to talk to you about my daughter, Norton. You've dodged me long enough, but now, by God . . ." His face twisting in sudden rage, he started around the table to get at Norton.

"Damn fool!" exclaimed Joe Devlin. He left Welker's table and stepped quickly forward to intercept Hutch Thompson. "Here, Hutch, don't start trouble," he began.

Thompson threw out his right hand and with the heel of it caught Devlin high on the chest and knocked him off balance. The moment's delay in his passage to Norton gave the card player a chance to slam back his chair and spring to his feet.

As Hutch Thompson lunged at him, Norton, who was at least four inches taller and weighed forty pounds more, struck Thompson with his fist. It was a hard blow and the older man reeled back and hit the wall.

Norton followed him. "You've been asking for trouble, Thompson," he snarled, hitting Hutch again. "As for that daughter of yours . . ." He stepped back to give Hutch Thompson a smashing, finishing blow, but Thompson lurched forward, half sobbing. He flailed out blindly and his fist collided squarely with Norton's nose.

It wasn't a very hard punch, but it blinded Norton. He went back and bumped into the table at which Welker sat. The table careened back and Norton, slipping, stumbled side-

wards against Welker. The latter gave him a savage shove that knocked Norton, already off balance, to the floor.

Blood was spattered over Norton's face as he climbed to his feet. His baleful eyes rested upon Welker. "You knocked me down," he cried. "Damn you, I'll teach *you* a lesson, too."

He advanced on Welker, who slammed aside his chair and got to his feet. Norton rushed in and Welker's right fist came up. The blow could have been heard out on the sidewalk. It landed flush on Norton's jaw, and the big man went down like an ox felled by a sledge. He lay on the floor without even a muscle twitching.

Hutch Thompson, his eyes threatening to pop from his head, took a step forward. "Johnny!" he whispered.

John Welker looked him square in the eye and walked past him to the bar. He signaled to the bartender. "A beer!"

The poker players had crowded around the fallen Norton. "Out cold," one of them exclaimed.

"Never thought anyone could knock out Norton with one punch," another observed.

All eyes went to Welker at the bar. Hutch Thompson was still staring at him. Finally he shook his head and muttering, headed for the door. No one paid any attention to him.

At the bar, Clifford Johnson, who had watched the entire tableau with sardonic interest, moved over to Welker.

"Nice work, Stranger," he said. He nodded in the direction of Norton. "How long do you think Alf will be out?"

"I'm not interested," replied Welker curtly.

"You ought to be, Mister," Johnson went on. "Alf Norton rides a fast horse, and you'll need all the head start you can get." He looked at Welker thoughtfully. "What I meant to say was, Norton's pretty handy with a six-shooter and he's got some boys working for him who are even handier."

"Hundred-dollar-a-month hands?" Welker asked contemptuously.

"Mmm," said Johnson thoughtfully. "That's pretty good pay for a—a cowhand. Or don't you think so?"

"It might be—if I was lookin' for a job."

"Well, if you are, I think I could use you. My name's Clifford Johnson."

Across the room, they had raised Alf Norton to a sitting position. He was reviving, but was still only semiconscious. Joe Devlin left the group and came over to the bar. He slipped his badge out of his pocket and showed it to Welker.

"This time I'm talking as a deputy. I don't say that you wasn't defending yourself, Smith, but it's my job to keep the

peace, and I won't be able to keep it when Norton comes around. Better get on your horse and start riding."

"And if I'm not in the mood for riding?"

"Get in the mood! We haven't got a calaboose in Buffalo Crossing, but if you force me . . ."

"Oh, come now, Devlin," growled Cliff Johnson. "You didn't make any move to stop Norton from beating up the old man."

"Thompson went for him," snapped Devlin.

"And Norton went for—what is it—Mr. Smith?"

Devlin scowled. "I don't want any killing."

"There won't be any," Welker said suddenly. "Not tonight."

He nodded to Johnson and headed for the door. The big rancher looked after him, a frown coming to his face. "I'll be damned. I didn't think he'd turn chicken."

Devlin, too, was frowning.

Outside, Welker walked to his horse, untied it from the hitchrail and mounted. He sat the animal for a moment, undecided in what direction to go, then turned it toward the river. But he did not go as far as the ferry.

Before he reached it, he turned to the right and rode downriver. He went about a quarter of a mile, the horse picking its way in the darkness. Then he stopped and dismounted. He took down his saddle roll, unsaddled the horse, and tied it to a stout bush. He carried the saddle roll and saddle a good hundred feet from the horse, made up a rough bed and stretched out.

It was long before he went to sleep, however. It was a clear night and he stared at the stars, while the memories tugged at him. He hadn't known about Buffalo Crossing. His presence in the vicinity was an accident. He had traveled so much and so long throughout Nebraska that it was only a matter of time until he was bound to come back to Salt River, but he had expected merely to make a crossing and continue on.

Hutch Thompson!

His presence here was not too hard to understand. He had come this way ten years ago. It was only natural that he would come again when going west to seek land. The land was good at Salt River, and he apparently had settled down near by.

Ellen Bayliss. Her father had suffered his greatest loss not too far away, and the country had a claim on him.

People come back to places . . . places that mean something to them.

Thompson was here.

Ellen Bayliss was here.

John Welker was here.

Perhaps . . . perhaps Ben Haskins and Harry Shaw would come this way.

Welker slept. Ordinarily, his was a dreamless sleep. He slept only when his body had a need for it, when he was vastly tired. He was tired tonight, but his sleep was not good. He dreamed . . . of death. And after a while he awakened and stared again at the stars.

21

Dawn came slowly in the east and when it was fully light, Welker got up. He carried the blanket roll and saddle back to his horse and put them on the animal. But he did not mount. For long moments he stood beside the horse, looking downstream.

Then, at last, he started toward the water, leading the horse. The bend in Salt River was only a little way off, and he walked to it and dropped the reins over the horse's head. It would not stray far and it could graze on the succulent grass that grew along the river.

The bend in the river was a sharp one and the bank was rather high. Logs and driftwood had piled up. Welker looked at them and then his eyes turned inward.

Hutch Thompson, ten years ago, had been a fairly strong man, but Johnny Welker's father had weighed a hundred and eighty pounds or more. Thompson would not have carried him too far.

Welker walked slowly inland. For some yards there was a tangle of underbrush and he went around it. Ahead was a good growth of poplars. The ground would be soft under them.

He saw it then. A low mound, leaf-covered and with a weathered cross at one end of it, a cross made from two lengths of poplar branches tied together with a vine. The vine had split, but still held together, although the right arm of the cross was dangling.

The wood was rotted, soft, but Welker traced out the name

that Hutch Thompson had carved ten years ago with his clasp knife: *J. Welker.*

There were no tears in Johnny Welker; he had felt very little emotion in the past ten years. He had not been moved the night before when he had seen the bully, Alf Norton, smash his fists into Hutch Thompson's face. He had himself struck Norton only because the man was coming at him to beat him the way he had beaten Hutch Thompson. But for that, Welker would not have aided Thompson. It was not in him to go out of his way to help anyone.

The grave of his father did not move John Welker. Yet a chill settled upon him and when he became aware of it, he turned away. He walked back and caught his horse and mounting, rode it along the river bank to the hamlet of Buffalo Crossing.

It was scarcely six o'clock when he dismounted in front of the restaurant, but the place was already open for business.

A sleepy cowboy sat at the counter having ham and eggs. The older Thompson girl, Ethel, was behind the counter. She came to him immediately. "Hello, Johnny!"

"So you know."

"I almost knew yesterday when you were in here. I wasn't sure, but last night Dad told me." A cloud flitted over her face. "He told me how—how you helped him."

Welker countered quickly to get off the subject. "How long have you lived here?"

"Oh, for years. We came here when we left Omaha. Dad took up a farm and then"—the cloud darkened on her face—"the Indians killed Mother, and he kind of lost interest in farming." She blinked and suddenly shook her head. "But you, Johnny?"

"My name is Smith!"

"Smith? But——"

"Smith!" he said firmly.

"I—I don't understand." Ethel Thompson looked at him worriedly. "Are you—in trouble?" Her eyes darted to the kitchen and again Welker shifted the talk away from himself. "What's this trouble your father is having with Alf Norton?"

Pain came into her eyes. She bit her lip, then lowered her voice. "It's over Linda. She—she wants Mr. Norton to marry her."

"She's only about fifteen, or is it sixteen?"

"Sixteen." Then Ethel blurted it out. "He's *got* to marry her."

"But he won't?"

"I'm afraid Linda will do something desperate. She—she's

said she'll kill herself. And Dad's threatened to kill Mr. Norton if he doesn't marry Linda." She suddenly smiled wanly at Welker. "This isn't getting you your breakfast. What would you like?"

"Anything."

"All right. I'll get you some ham and eggs." She went quickly into the kitchen, her lips pressed tightly together in an effort to maintain her self-control.

Welker sat at the counter. He could hear the muffled voices of the two girls in the kitchen. The cowboy finished his breakfast and put some money on the counter. He looked at Welker, shaking his head.

"Guess I'd better be moseyin' out to the ranch." He grimaced. "That's the trouble with goin' on a toot. The day after." Shaking his head he left the restaurant.

Ethel Thompson came out of the kitchen carrying a platter of food. As she was setting it down before Welker, the kitchen door opened again and Ethel's sister, Linda, came out hesitantly. Her eyes were swollen, but she essayed a timid smile.

"Hello," she said. "Ethel says I ought to remember you."

"You were only about six when I lived at your place."

She shook her head. "For a long time I thought I had a big brother. But I don't remember you. The brother wasn't—like you."

Ethel said, "She used to talk about you a lot until—until a few years ago. But *I* never forgot you, Johnny."

He began to eat. But when they did not leave, he looked at Ethel. "How far from town is your farm?"

"Oh, there isn't any farm. Not any more. Dad works on the H-B Ranch now and we—Linda and I—live here in town."

"H-B? That's Ellen Bayliss's place?"

"Yes. She inherited it from her father. She never lived here until just a little while ago. She's—nice. I can't say that I care for her uncle, though."

"Uncle?"

"Arthur Bayliss. He's been running the ranch since Mr. Bayliss—Ellen's father—died. Dad says he isn't near the man Hugh Bayliss was. The ranch is running down a lot, he says."

"You've talked to Ellen Bayliss?"

"Just to say hello. She only comes to town once or twice a week. She doesn't eat here or anything like that. It's only when we meet on the street. The cowboys say——" She stopped. "That's gossiping."

"What's gossiping?"

"About Ellen Bayliss and Mr. Johnson who owns the next

biggest ranch. They—they say they're going to get married." A light frown creased her forehead as she continued. "Well, I guess she's very rich and Cliff—Mr. Johnson . . ." Her words trailed off, then she exclaimed, "We've got to get busy, Linda!"

"I suppose so," Linda said without spirit. She started toward the kitchen. Ethel went after her, but turned before she reached the door. "Are you staying—here?"

"Perhaps—for a few days."

"Then I'll see you again?"

He nodded.

She went into the kitchen, but returned in a moment with a basin of water and some cleaning things. She began to scrub down the counter. Welker finished his breakfast and put money on the counter.

"The pie," Ethel said, "always goes with the dinner. I—I wasn't giving you anything extra."

For an instant he almost grinned. But when he got outside he was sober once more. He looked up and down the little street. There wasn't a soul on it, although a weary-looking cowpony stood outside the saloon, probably still there from the night before.

22

Welker knew only the general direction of the H-B Ranch from having seen Ellen Bayliss driving past him the day before, but he started down the same road and after a mile or so came to a fork in the road. He took the right fork.

He followed it for three or four miles before he saw a couple of cowboys jogging across the range. He turned his horse from the road and trotted it toward the cowboys. They pulled up when they saw him coming.

"Any idea where I'll find Hutch Thompson?" Welker asked as he came up to the cowboys.

One of the men pointed to a low knoll to the south. "Over at the ranch house."

The second man chuckled. "If he ain't gone gunning for Alf Norton."

"That's funny?" Welker asked.

The two cowboys exchanged glances. Then the first one said truculently, "It is, if you know how much chance he's got against Norton."

The second one added contemptuously, "And you can tell him we said so!"

"Tell him yourself," retorted Welker and turned his horse away. He put it into a lope and left the cowboys behind. Topping the knoll, he looked down upon the corrals and ranch buildings of the H-B. They covered several acres of ground, most of which were shaded by oaks and a few cottonwood trees.

The ranch house was made of logs, but with its wings, was of considerable size. Near by was a long bunkhouse large enough for a score or more of cowboys.

Welker rode down, but as he approached the buildings, he veered from the ranch house toward the bunkhouse. As he neared the long building he saw a small office building near by. He rode toward it.

As he dismounted, Hutch Thompson came out of the little building. He exclaimed as he recognized Welker.

"Johnny Welker!" he cried. He came forward, his hand outstretched, but Welker ignored the hand.

"I'm not using the name of Welker," he said shortly.

"You're—you're wanted?"

"No. It's just—it saves trouble."

Thompson looked at him soberly. "I should have stopped you when you first started practicing with that gun you bought in Omaha. I've blamed myself for that. Oh, I've heard about you over the years. You've killed a lot of men——"

"And *you* want to kill one now?"

Thompson flinched at the thrust. "Norton's ruined my little girl. I made a mistake there, too. I should have kept them here with me instead of letting them go into town. But the way things were going and the cowboys always hanging around, I gave in." He swallowed hard, then added bitterly, "Seems like everything I've done all my life was a mistake. Settling here when the Indians were on the rampage——"

"Why don't you take the girls and go back East?"

"The girls won't go. I thought of doing that when Hugh Bayliss died. I didn't think I'd like it with his brother running things. That's when the girls moved to town. Linda was making sheep's-eyes at Alf Norton and Ethel—well, Cliff Johnson was coming around then. He's still coming around." His eyes went to the ranch house.

"It's your problem," Welker said with irritation.

Thompson nodded, misery on his face. "I know, Johnny."

"Stay away from Norton!"

Thompson looked at Welker in surprise. "From you, Johnny? After last night."

"Norton will kill you. And if he doesn't, his gun fighters will."

"Gun fighters?"

"He's been hiring some." Welker made an impatient gesture. "That's none of my business." He regarded Thompson steadily. "You've been around here almost ten years."

"Come next spring, yes."

"Has a man named Ben Haskins ever come this way? He may not have been using that name, but he's related to a man who used to have a blacksmith shop just a few miles the other side of Salt River."

"The man you killed in 'sixty-six?"

"You know about that?"

"I know a lot about you, Johnny," Thompson said, frowning. "You've spent these years looking for the four men who——"

"I've found two of them," snapped Welker. "But there are two still alive. Ben Haskins and a man named Harry Shaw."

"I've heard of Ben Haskins," said Thompson slowly. "He's still got kinfolks around here."

"Where?"

"The man you killed—Ben's cousin—you knew he was married, didn't you?" Then, as Welker made no reply, "He had a wife and two children. The girl got married three-four years ago and moved away. Her brother, Charlie——" He stopped.

"Go on!"

"He's here."

"What do you mean, here?"

Thompson made a vague gesture. "He works for the H-B. That is, he draws pay, but he doesn't do enough work to pay for his grub. But then, nobody else does since Hugh Bayliss died. The ranch is falling to pieces."

"Isn't Bayliss's brother running the ranch?"

Thompson's face registered disgust. "He ain't the man his brother was."

"What's your job here?"

"I draw a foreman's pay, but since Arthur Bayliss has been running things, I've got as much to say as—as one of the steers on this ranch."

"This Haskins fellow," Welker interrupted. "Where can I find him?"

"Is that all that's on your mind?" Thompson asked bitterly.

"Where is he?" Welker insisted.

"Probably behind the bunkhouse, or over at the corrals."

Welker turned away from Thompson. The older man looked after him, his shoulders slumped. He started to follow him, then suddenly changed his mind and went back into the office building.

Welker continued on toward the bunkhouse. Three cowboys were pitching horseshoes behind the long building.

"Haskins around?" Welker asked.

One of the men pointed to the corral and then all watched as Welker walked toward it. Two men were seated on the top rail watching two others saddle a fractious bronc.

"Which one of you is Charlie Haskins?" Welker asked as he came up.

The two men on top of the corral fence looked at one another. Then the younger, a shifty-eyed man in his early twenties, sneered down at Welker. "Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"And who're you?" The shifty-eyed one snapped his fingers. "Don't tell me, I'll bet I can guess. Your name's Smith."

"You're Haskins?"

"What if I am?"

"Then I want to talk to you."

"Look, Mister," Charlie Haskins said truculently, "if you know what's good for you, you'll climb on your fleabag and hightail it out of this territory. I heard what you did in town last night, but you caught Alf Norton by surprise. Don't let him see you again. That's a warning."

"Get down," Welker ordered curtly.

Haskins exclaimed in astonishment, "Be damned!"

"I said, *get down!*"

Haskins started to bluster, but stopped suddenly. He climbed down and faced Welker. His face had gone taut and as he looked into Welker's cold eyes, a little shiver ran through him.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

Welker jerked his head to the right and turning, walked off. Haskins' face twitched, and for one desperate moment it looked as if he would draw and shoot Welker in the back. His hand even started for his gun, but the carelessness of Welker in turning his back, the contempt with which he had spoken, unnerved the young cowboy.

He trotted after Welker, out of earshot of those at the cor-

ral. The H-B cowboys stopped what they were doing and turned to watch Welker and young Haskins.

Welker came directly to the point. "You've got a cousin named Ben Haskins?"

Charlie Haskins stared at Welker in utter astonishment. "H-how did you know?"

"I asked you a question."

Haskins gulped. "He ain't really a cousin. He's a—a second cousin or something like that."

"Your father was his cousin."

"I guess that's about it," admitted young Haskins. "But I ain't never seen Ben—not since I was ten-twelve years old."

"But you've heard of him. You've heard *from* him?"

"No!"

His answer was quick, explosive. Too much so.

Welker took a step toward Haskins. "You're lying!"

"Don't you call me a liar," snarled Haskins.

Welker lashed his face with the back of his hand. "Liar!" he taunted.

The epithet alone was a challenge, the blow accompanying it and the repetition of the lie could result in only one response. Haskins would have to draw on Welker.

The inclination was almost overpowering, and Welker could see it in the cowboy's face. But something held Haskins back—something he had read in Welker's eyes. Death.

He groaned aloud. "I—I'm telling the truth."

"You've heard from him," repeated Welker ominously and again struck Haskins with the back of his hand.

Haskins broke. A sob shook him and with it went the last of his manhood. "No—no, I didn't. But Ma got a letter from him last year. He—he was in California."

"Where?"

"A place called San Bernar—San Bernardino."

There was such a town. A man like Charlie Haskins would not have heard of it unless he had seen the name somewhere, or had a contact with it.

Welker stepped back and then Charlie Haskins, virtually hysterical from fright, blurted out, "Bayliss has sent for him."

Welker, about to turn away, whirled back, "Arthur Bayliss? Why would he send for your cousin?"

Haskins saw that he had gone too far, but he could no longer retreat. He swallowed hard and cried, "He—he wants someone killed."

"Who?"

"Cliff Johnson!"

"Why does he want Johnson killed?"

Haskins opened his mouth to reply, then stopped. Welker turned, saw Ellen Bayliss coming toward them. He turned his back abruptly on Charlie Haskins and went to meet Ellen.

"Hello," she called when still some yards away. She was smiling, and there was recognition in her eyes.

Welker said quickly, "Hello, Miss Bayliss."

"*Miss* Bayliss?" Ellen asked archly.

In the background, a dozen cowboys had gathered to watch the shocking scene between Welker and Charlie Haskins. Welker was aware of their presence and did not want to talk to Ellen where anyone else could hear them.

He motioned toward the house and started to walk toward it.

Ellen's enthusiasm was checked. "You *are* Johnny Wel——" she began.

"Yes," he said curtly, "I am. But I'm not using that name these days."

"I see," she said, then said no more until they had reached the house where she opened the door. "Come in."

He entered and she followed. The room was a rather large one, although furnished simply with plain furniture, some skin rugs and Indian blankets hung from the rough log walls.

She nodded to a chair. "Sit down," and continued on to a door that led into another room. Vexed, Welker stood in the living room and waited.

Ellen Bayliss returned, carrying a magazine. She held it up so that he could see the title: *George Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*. "Have you seen this?"

He shrugged. "Yes."

"Is it—true?"

"If I ever met the man I don't remember it."

"But is it true?"

"Not more than half," he replied irritably.

She looked at him oddly, then crossed to a chair and seated herself. "Johnny," she said quietly, "I'm going to tell you something. My—my father talked to me about you—a lot. He—he didn't like you."

Welker made an impatient gesture.

She went on, "That first time I met you, when I was only eleven years old—I told him about it and he said I was never to talk to you again. And then, when you saved my life——"

"I never saved your life!"

"Oh, yes, you did. You—you pushed me behind you so the bullets would hit you first." She paused. "Even then—Father didn't like you."

"Your father's opinion of me doesn't interest me in the least," Welker said bluntly.

She winced, almost as if he had struck her. "I heard—and it wasn't Father who told me that, it was Mr. Nicholson—that you were a dedicated man . . . dedicated to revenge."

"All right," he said harshly.

"The Sioux killed my mother," she said simply. "It—it hurts every time I think of it, but I don't hate Indians."

"You're wasting your time," Welker said.

She was stung. "You're not—as hard as you want people to believe."

"I'm not hard. I'm not soft. I'm not—anything."

"How old are you, Johnny?"

"Miss Bayliss," Welker said, "nothing you say is going to change me one way or the other. You can't insult me, you can't weaken me by—by trying to show any personal interest in me. I came here to see a man who works for you. Since talking to him, I've decided that I'd like to see your uncle."

"He isn't here."

"Where is he?"

"He left for North Platte early this morning."

"To meet a train?"

She looked at him, puzzled. "No. . . . All right, if you must know, he's gone to try to get a loan at the bank. We need money."

He looked at her, puzzled. "I gathered that this is a pretty big operation."

"It is, but—we need money. We've had a lot of trouble. We—we've lost a lot of stock lately."

"Rustlers?"

"I suppose that's what you'd call them, but it's not as simple as that. You—you worked for the railroad. Did you know that the government gave the Union Pacific railroad over fourteen million acres of land, every other section, for twenty miles on each side of the track from Omaha to Utah?"

"I don't know anything about those things."

"The railroad put a price of a dollar and a half an acre on this land," Ellen went on, "but because Dad had worked for them so long, they sold him ten sections at half price. That's six thousand four hundred acres." She paused. "He chose this land here because—because Mother's buried here. He brought in a lot of cattle, and he built up one of the best ranches in Nebraska. Six months ago he died."

"And now the cattle rustlers have moved in?"

A worried frown creased Ellen's forehead. "I told you it

wasn't as clear as that. When Dad first came here there were only two or three settlers who'd squatted on government land. Dad bought them out. Hutch Thompson, our foreman, was one of the squatters. But then Alf Norton settled on land he bought from the government. And Cliff Johnson."

She leaned forward and traced a crisscross pattern on the floor. "This is what started the trouble. The railroad owned *every other* section of land—like a checkerboard. Every other square remained government land. I suppose Dad should have protected himself right at the start by buying up the other sections from the other settlers, which would have given him a solid block of land, but Congress had set a price of two dollars and a half an acre on the land, which was more money than Dad could have paid. And anyway, since there was no one else out here at the time, he didn't think it was necessary. But Norton and Johnson and two or three others bought the land from the government—and—and they claim all stock running on their land that is unbranded belongs to them."

"And they made it stick by bringing in gun fighters?" Welker asked.

"I—I don't know. I've only been here four months. Uncle Arthur says they've been doing it for years, but the foreman says they were afraid of Dad."

"So now your uncle's hiring gun fighters?"

"What do you mean?" Ellen asked, puzzled. Then she exclaimed, "You?"

"No," Welker said quickly. "But I hadn't been in town a half hour yesterday before Joe Devlin tried to steer me out to Alf Norton and then Cliff Johnson made me an offer."

"But you said you were using the name of Smith? How would they know you were a—a gun fighter?"

"And your uncle," Welker said, ignoring her question, "he's sent all the way to California for a gun fighter—to kill Cliff Johnson!"

Ellen gasped in shock. "To kill—Cliff Johnson! That's absurd!"

"Is it?"

"He *likes* Cliff. Why, he's even suggested that I——" She stopped. "Who told you Uncle Arthur was sending for a man to—to kill Cliff?"

"One of your cowboys."

"It isn't true. It *can't* be true," cried Ellen. But the damage had been done, Welker knew. She was doubtful, even in her vehemence.

Outside, there was the clatter of hoofs, then a man's boots pounded the hard earth and a voice called out, "Ellen? Where are you?"

Ellen sprang to her feet. "It's Cliff!"

She started for the door, then stopped. "I—I can't face him, after what you told me."

"Maybe the man lied to me," Welker said, "but I don't think so." He went to the door and opened it.

Cliff Johnson was coming toward the house. He saw Welker. "You get around."

"So do you," Welker retorted and started out. Johnson stopped. "I'd like to talk to you, Smith."

"About rustling?"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Johnson.

"Or do you just call it branding mavericks?" Welker asked thinly.

He walked past Johnson. The rancher started to reach out a hand to stop him, but thought better of it. He half turned to look after Welker, but Ellen Bayliss came out on the veranda.

"What'd that fellow want here?" he growled to her.

Ellen was still flustered. "Why—he's someone I knew years ago. He—he worked on the railroad, under Dad."

Welker rode down the road from the H-B Ranch to the fork. The right road led due south and since it seemed so well traveled, was probably the road to North Platte. He stopped his horse and looked down both roads, the one leading to Buffalo Crossing, the other to North Platte.

For a moment he debated mentally the road to take, the right one to North Platte and away from Salt River, or the left one to the river town which probably meant—Death.

He finally made the decision and started down the right fork. He rode twenty feet, then suddenly exclaimed angrily and turned his horse back and went down the Salt River road.

23

Ben Haskins, carrying a blanket roll, stepped down from the train at North Platte and found Arthur Bayliss waiting on the platform. He saluted Bayliss by raising his right hand a few inches, but did not offer to shake hands.

He said, "You're getting old."

"You're not getting any younger," retorted Bayliss.

Haskins chuckled wolfishly. "I can still lick you with one hand tied behind my back. Maybe both hands." He looked around the station platform. "Where're the horses?"

Bayliss pointed to the buckboard. "I came in the wagon."

Haskins snorted. "Did you think I couldn't ride a horse any more?"

"I didn't want anyone at the ranch to know I was meeting someone," Bayliss replied irritably. "I told the girl I was going to the bank to raise a loan."

"Did you?" asked Bayliss. "Get the loan?"

"I haven't been to the bank. It was just an excuse."

They climbed into the buckboard, and Bayliss turned the horses and started them off at a trot. "I'm still not sure I should have sent for you," Bayliss began.

"Why not?" Haskins asked easily. "We're old pals, ain't we? You got trouble, you call on me. *I* got trouble . . ." He shrugged, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Bayliss drove in frowning silence. Haskins, looking at him sidewards, relaxed. After a while he took out a dirty plug of tobacco and bit off a generous piece. He tendered the plug to Bayliss who waved it away.

"Don't chew, don't smoke," Haskins observed. "Bet you don't drink either."

"I don't."

"Same old Sunday School teacher. Wasn't that what you were doing when they caught you with your hand in the cashbox?"

Bayliss exclaimed angrily, "Haskins, you always had a way of rubbing a man the wrong way!"

Haskins grinned. "I never called a shovel more than a spade. But as I remember, when there was dirty work to be done, you always were around—after someone else had done the dirty work. All right, Harry, the hell with that!"

"Arthur!" cried Bayliss. "My name's Arthur Bayliss."

"Sure. I forgot. Get on with it, *Arthur*. What's the game? Who do I kill—and do I get to know why, or do I just kill him?"

Bayliss winced at Haskins' bluntness, but he set his jaws and a glint came into his eyes. "I told you that my brother has a ranch here."

"Yep. He stole his pile from the railroad and put it into land and cows."

"Hugh never stole a dollar in his life," Bayliss said angrily.

"All right, calm down. You were the only black sheep in your family. Your brother put his money into a ranch and then he cashed in his checks. You inherited the boodle and now you're in trouble."

"The trouble," Arthur Bayliss said with assumed patience, "is that I did not inherit. My brother had a daughter, a chit of a girl, who is now twenty. She got everything. I'm a hired hand, that's all."

"A girl," mused Haskins. "You could have taken care of a girl without——"

"No!" cried Bayliss. "She's not to be harmed. I—I've never sunk *that* low. She's my niece." In a sudden frenzy he gripped Haskins' arm. "She's not to be hurt, understand?"

"All right," Haskins said calmly. "I won't harm a hair of her head. But you've got some scheme to get your brother's ranch, haven't you? Stop beating around the haystack."

"I gave you a hint at the depot," Bayliss blurted out. "She's short of money. Hugh put every dollar into cattle. He was still quite young, and he expected to live a long time. There was very little cash, just a lot of land and livestock——"

"Which can be turned into cash?"

"If necessary, yes. The—the plan is to make her sick of the cattle business and—and sell to me."

"You've got cash?"

"No, but I—I could raise it."

"So can the girl."

"Listen to me, Ben. There are two other large ranches in this area. Both of them are—are stealing cattle from my—Ellen's ranch. They're stealing a lot of stock. One of them is a man named Norton, the other is Cliff Johnson." He swallowed. "Cliff Johnson wants to marry my niece."

"And?"

"That would ruin everything. He's got land, he's got cattle and—and he's got a lot of men working for him. If he married Ellen, they'd merge the two ranches and be so strong that no one could touch them."

"In other words, he could then be strong enough to keep this other fellow, what's his name, Norton—from rustling cattle?"

Bayliss nodded.

Haskins spat out a copious mouthful of tobacco juice. "Your niece, how does she feel about this Johnson?"

"She'll marry him."

"In other words, then, if Johnson met with—with an accident . . ." He looked at Bayliss and since the other man did not now protest, he nodded. "Johnson, eh?"

"He's not an easy man to—to eliminate, Ben. He's got at least twenty riders, some of them pretty hard cases."

"So?"

"And it's got to be done in a way that Ellen wouldn't suspect. The idea is—to discourage her so that she'll be glad to go back to California."

"California's a very nice place, Harry—I mean, Arthur. You ought to come out and take a look at it sometime. All right, what else should I know that you haven't told me?"

"That's about the size of it, Ben."

"Uh-uh. What about this fellow, Norton, you mentioned? He's got a long rope, too. What about stopping *him?*"

Bayliss hesitated. "No." He frowned and although aware of Haskins' searching look at him, kept his eyes on the road for a minute or two. But finally he exhaled lightly. "Norton's the man who's going to give me the money to buy out Ellen."

"Hey, wait a minute," exclaimed Haskins. "He's stealing from you now, but he's going to lend you money?"

"You missed the point, Ben," said Bayliss.

"Where? Both Johnson and Norton are stealing, but you want Johnson put out of the way, yet Norton——" Haskins stopped. "Norton's in with you!"

"Of course he is. The stock he's stealing I'm *letting* him steal. He's piling up a cash backlog which he turns over to me when Ellen gets ready to sell the place to me."

Haskins guffawed. "Damn you for a cute one, Harry! You never could come right out into the open and grab something you wanted. No, you've got to be sly about it, do it with all the fancy trimmings." He laughed loudly, and Bayliss watched him with a reddening face.

When Haskins finally subsided, Bayliss said hastily, "You're all muscle and brawn, Ben."

"That makes us a good team. You do the scheming and I do the dirty work."

"Ben," said Bayliss deliberately, "look around. Doesn't any of this country look familiar to you?"

Haskins shrugged. "I've seen a million square miles of land that don't look any different to me."

"You've never been to North Platte before?"

"I never even heard of it until you wrote me."

"And Buffalo Crossing? Have you ever heard of *that?*"

"Buffalo Crossing? Seems to me I've got some kinfolk in that neighborhood, but I ain't heard from them in years."

"How do you suppose I got your address, after all these years? One of your relations gave it to me."

"I wondered about that. I ain't much for writing letters, but"—Haskins' eyes suddenly narrowed—"say, how far is this Buffalo Crossing from here?"

"You never were much good at geography, Ben." Bayliss nodded ahead. "Buffalo Crossing's just about ten miles straight ahead. It's on a river. Ten years ago there wasn't any town there at all—just a ferry."

Haskins was finally stirred. "Salt River!" He whirled, stared at Bayliss. "You've lived here all these years?"

"Since 'sixty-nine. Hugh wanted me to come and help him with the ranch."

A perplexed frown creased Haskins' forehead. "What about—before 'sixty-nine? Where did you live then?"

"Illinois . . . Indiana . . . I knock around."

"Then you don't know about——?"

"Johnny Welker?"

"And you still came here?" Haskins finally showed grudging admiration for Bayliss.

"I figured this was one place he wouldn't be looking. Besides, he's looking for a man named Harry Shaw."

"If he saw the rest of us, he saw you," Haskins said grimly.

"But if you'll remember, Ben, *I* didn't——"

"You were with us!" Haskins snarled. "We were in it together—Wallington, Mullaney, me—and you!"

Bayliss shuddered. "I didn't know Mullaney was going to shoot the ferryman. I didn't know *you* were going to——"

"Shut up!"

Bayliss lapsed into silence. Haskins began to swear softly. "Did you hear how he tracked Wallington and Mullaney into the Sioux camp and killed Wallington with about a thousand Indians around him? He couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen at the time."

Bayliss nodded. "My brother Hugh was present when he

finally caught up with Mullaney. Hugh told me about it." He shook his head.

"If Mullaney'd used just one more bullet," Haskins said grimly, "just one more bullet that day at Salt River and a lot of people'd still be alive today." He blinked. "Do you suppose he's still alive?"

"Who'd kill him?" Bayliss asked. "From the stories I've heard of him——"

"No man's that good," snapped Haskins. "Somewhere along the line, he's bound to make a mistake." He squinted. "I haven't heard of him in years. It's my hunch that he made that mistake."

"We'd have heard of it."

"Not necessarily. Maybe the man who got him didn't know who he was—just another gun slinger. Maybe the Indians got him. The name Johnny Welker wouldn't mean anything to them."

"He spent a lot of time in the Indian country," Bayliss said thoughtfully. "Perhaps . . ." He shrugged.

24

It was nearing noon when Welker tied his horse to the hitch-rail in front of Devlin's place. Four or five horses were already at the rail.

A lean young cowboy stood outside the saloon, smoking a brown-paper cigarette. He watched Welker as the latter stood by his horse, looking toward the river landing. The ferry was on the far side of the river.

Then, as Welker strolled down to the landing, the cowboy flipped away his cigarette and went into the saloon.

Welker stood on the river bank looking out over the water. But his eyes were not focused on anything. The impulse to turn and look to the left finally overwhelmed him and he made a half turn. His eyes fell on Devlin's saloon, went to the rear of it. He started to walk in that direction and had gone a half-dozen steps before he stopped.

Shaking his head impatiently he swerved and went to the door of the saloon.

He went in.

Two men stood at the bar, and Norton was with two more at a table near by. A lone cowboy sat near the door. There was a bruise on Norton's jaw. Welker stopped inside the door for an instant, then walked to the bar.

Devlin was inside his office and came to the door. He looked at Welker, but did not come forward. A bartender moved up in front of Welker and nervously mopped the bar.

"A beer," Welker said.

"Yes, sir!"

The bartender moved quickly away, drew the glass of beer and brought it to Welker. He did not wait for the payment, but moved away quickly.

Seven or eight feet from Welker, one of the two cowboys poured out a stiff shot of whiskey and downed it in a single gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then looked down toward Welker.

"He's not so big," he observed in a loud aside to his friend.

Welker sipped at his beer.

The second cowboy cleared his throat noisily. "He on'y packs one gun," he said. "The real tough ones always carry two." There was heavy sarcasm in his tone.

Welker half turned and looked at Alf Norton. The cattleman's eyes dropped quickly, but came up again and he tried to stare down Welker. Welker turned his back on him deliberately and drank some more beer.

"Drinks beer," observed the first of the two cowboys at the bar.

Welker said, "How're things out at Norton's place?"

"Fine," replied the cowboy, "just fine." He nudged his partner. "He talks."

"For myself," replied Welker. "Which is more than I can say for some people."

Alf Norton shoved back his chair so violently that it crashed to the floor. He leaped to his feet—and then stayed where he was. The two cowboys at the bar looked at Norton, waiting for their cue.

And it did not come!

Norton remained standing, his eyes on Welker. Once his mouth opened, but no words came out. Welker drank the last of his beer and tossed a quarter on the bar.

He turned and looked once more at Norton. "Make up your mind," he said and walked toward the door. He went through.

Then Norton moved toward the bar. Devlin came forward.

"I'll kill him myself," Norton snarled.

"Will you?" asked Devlin calmly.

"At my time," Norton snapped. "It's got to be done legal. I —I've got too much at stake to do it wrong."

"Sure," said Devlin. "Sure."

Welker entered the restaurant and found Ethel Thompson, in a clean white dress and apron, scrubbing down the counter. There were no other customers.

"Hello," she said brightly. "You want your dinner. What'll it be?"

"What do you have besides steak?"

"Steak. I could fix you some ham and eggs though."

"All right."

She put down her cleaning things and went into the kitchen. In a few minutes, Welker smelled ham frying and heard eggs sizzling. There was no talk in the kitchen though.

A horse stopped outside the restaurant and Welker, looking through the window, saw Hutch Thompson dismount. He shot a quick look toward the kitchen, then Thompson opened the door of the restaurant.

He called, "Ethel!"

Then he saw Welker. "Johnny."

Ethel came out of the kitchen carrying a platter of ham and eggs. "Dad!" she exclaimed.

Thompson seated himself heavily on the end stool. Welker noted that he was breathing hard and wondered idly if Thompson had been drinking. Ethel set the platter of food on the counter, two or three feet from Welker and went quickly forward, behind the counter, so that she was directly opposite her father.

"What's wrong, Dad?" she asked in alarm.

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm all right." His eyes went to Welker. "Alf Norton's in town, Johnny. His horse is over at the saloon."

Welker nodded. "I saw Norton a few minutes ago."

"And—nothing happened?"

"Nothing."

A groan escaped Thompson's lips and Ethel, truly alarmed, came around the counter and took hold of her father's arm. "Dad, you're not well."

"I'm all right."

"You're not. You ought to be in bed."

"I'm all right," Thompson repeated. He brushed his big hand over his eyes. "Just a little tired."

"Go home," said Welker.

"Home," said Thompson wearily. "I haven't had a home—in a long time." He looked at Ethel and shook his head. "I never did make much of a home for you and Linda after your mother died."

"You did your best, Dad. We—we didn't complain."

". . . shouldn't have let you go off by yourselves."

"It's all right, Dad. . . . Please—you're sick. Go over to our room and rest awhile. Linda's there. It'll be all right—everything's going to be all right. Here—I'll go with you, Dad."

"No." Thompson got up and shook himself. "I'm all right."

"You're not, Dad."

"I'm fine." He raised his hand and dropped it on Ethel's shoulder. "I'm all right, don't worry 'bout me. Just—take care of yourself." He started for the door. Ethel went with him, but at the door he pushed her back.

He went out and Ethel stood by the door. "He's sick," she whispered. "Go with him, Johnny. See that he gets back to the ranch."

"He doesn't want me along," said Welker testily.

Ethel cried out in alarm. "He's not getting on his horse."

A cowboy appeared in the door. He looked over his shoulder and grinned at Ethel. "What's the matter with your old man?" he asked. "Had too many?"

"He's sick," exclaimed Ethel.

"Yeah?" The cowboy shrugged and sat down on a stool. "How about some grub?"

Ethel stood at the door, torn between concern for her father and her duty to a customer in the restaurant.

The cowboy tapped the counter. "Here I am, Beautiful. How about some service?"

Ethel turned, essayed a weak smile. Welker swore under his breath and got to his feet. He started for the door—and stopped.

The muffled boom of a gun came from down the street.

Ethel, tensed for it, screamed. She whirled, rushing for the door. Welker caught her savagely.

"Dad!" screamed Ethel. "Dad!"

She knew. Welker tried to hold her, but she fought him and he let her go. She plunged out of the restaurant.

The cowboy got to his feet, amazement on his face. "What hit her?"

Welker stepped to the door. Two doors away, a cowboy came running out of Devlin's saloon, clambered aboard his pony and sent it galloping down the street, past the restaurant.

Ethel had already disappeared into the saloon.

Another cowboy came out, walking quickly. He mounted his horse and rode it past the restaurant. The cowboy from the restaurant came out and stood beside Welker.

"Something happen?" he asked.

"Go down to Devlin's and see."

The man looked oddly at Welker, but shrugged and started down the street. Welker watched him go into the saloon. He was inside only a half minute or so, then came out. He was pale and his face was taut as he came up to Welker.

"Hutch Thompson just got killed!" he said in a tone of awe.

"Is Norton in the saloon?"

"I didn't see him." The cowboy rubbed his face. "Ethel's there, layin' on her father and cryin' something awful." He shuddered. "Never could stand a woman cryin'."

"Or a man," said Welker cryptically. The cowboy stared at Welker and the latter gestured impatiently. "You seem to know Ethel pretty well. Happen to know where she lives?"

"Sure. She and her sister have a room at the Connelleys'. Right around the corner, there—second house—the one with the white paint."

Welker walked away from him. He went to the corner and turned right. A moment later he stood before the white Connelley house. The door was partly open, but he could not hear anyone inside. He knocked on the door, waited, then pushed the door open. He stepped into a sparsely furnished "front" room and looked toward the rear. The kitchen was on the left and on the right were two doors, apparently leading to the bedrooms. One door was open. Inside he could see a bed made up neatly.

He stepped to the other door and listened a moment, then frowning, knocked lightly. There was no reply and he opened the door.

Linda was lying on the bed, her eyes wide open—sightless. She was dead.

"So that's why he did it," Welker said aloud. He walked out of the house and stood on the little porch.

He was still standing there, minutes later when Ethel Thompson turned the corner. She was walking slowly, her chin high in the air.

She came up to the house and stopped before the porch.

"Don't go in," Welker said.

"It's all right. I—I know."

"About your sister?"

She nodded. "She stayed home today. She—she said she was

sick." She paused. "They told me in the saloon. Dad came in, yelled that Norton had—had killed Linda and—and drew a gun."

"Who killed your father? Norton?"

"They said it was self-defense." She stopped and looked at Welker. "You could have stopped him in the restaurant."

Welker shook his head. "I could have stopped him—then. But what about later?"

"You knew that Norton was in the saloon. Dad—told you."

"And you think I should have killed him—to keep him from killing your father?"

"You're Johnny Welker!" she cried poignantly.

"Yes," he said, "I'm Johnny Welker." He pointed. "Over there, where Devlin's saloon stands—I lived there once. Did he—ever tell you?"

"Some of it. He—didn't say where. Just that your father and mother had been killed and—and he found you, wounded."

"It was right over there. He found me, half dead. He buried my mother and——" Welker stopped and when he spoke again, his voice was low and even. "He found me too late."

She stared at him. "I think—I know—how you feel."

"Do you?" he asked. "Do you know how I feel right now?"

"Yes. It's—it's terrible."

"I feel—nothing." Welker gestured with his hand. "You know what all this means to me? . . . Nothing!"

She took a half step back. Her eyes, staring at him, widened in awe. "You—say that—to *me?*"

"My father's grave is down near the bend in the river. My mother's is over there behind Devlin's saloon. I've seen—a lot of dead people."

"Including those you killed!" Ethel shot at him.

He nodded and stepping down from the veranda, walked past her. Ethel stood for a moment where she was, then went into the house.

Welker, walking back toward the street, passed a middle-aged couple running toward the house into which Ethel had just gone. The Connelleys, probably.

Welker went back to Ethel's restaurant. He stopped and looked inside. The door stood open but the place was empty. He walked toward Devlin's saloon.

He entered.

The bartender had a revolver lying on the bar, close to his reach. Joe Devlin stood at the end of the bar. Two cowboys

stood near the bar, their uneasy eyes on the blanket-covered form of Hutch Thompson lying on the floor.

Devlin shot a nervous look at Welker as he entered. "It was self-defense," he said. "He came in here and when he saw Norton, he went for his gun. I don't say he didn't have the right after what Norton had done to the girl, but—it was self-defense."

Welker walked down the length of the bar, Devlin's apprehension growing as he approached. But Welker passed him. He continued on to a door at the rear of the long room. Devlin, whirling, watched him open the door and go out.

A low shed had been built behind the saloon. At one end of it a pile of stove wood had been stacked. The rest of the shed was used to stable horses.

Welker came up to the shed and looked at it. His eyes flickered to the ferry landing which he could just see.

He reached the end of the shed and looked at the manure pile and beyond it. He made a small circle and saw the low mound of earth. He touched it with his foot. It was solid. The mound was only about three feet long. The other half was covered by the manure.

The back door of the saloon banged open and Joe Devlin came out. He saw Welker and came forward, about half the distance.

"Could I help you?" he asked.

Welker raised his eyes from the mound. "This is a grave."

"It was there when I built the place." Devlin shrugged. "Some old-timer. Indians probably got him."

Welker's mouth twisted crookedly. He turned and started back toward the saloon. He passed Devlin, and the saloonkeeper moistened his lips and after a moment followed him back into the saloon.

Welker walked from the rear door to the middle of the saloon. He took hold of a table, dumped it on its side. He pushed the chairs toward it, then reached out and pulled another table over onto the pile. He was throwing chairs onto the heap when Devlin came rushing forward.

"What do you think you're doing, Smith?" he cried.

"I'm going to make a fire," Welker said.

Devlin's face blanched. "Look here," he cried. "I'm a patient man, but—but I'm also the deputy sheriff."

Deliberately, Welker unbuckled his gun belt. He drew the revolver from the holster, tossed the gun belt onto the pile of tables and chairs, then carefully thrust the revolver under his belt.

"Don't make a mistake, Devlin," he said quietly.

Devlin's face twitched. "You're not——"

"Welker!"

Welker reached out and caught up a chair. He tossed it on to the heap, then looking around, crossed to the bar. He reached up and took down the overhanging kerosene lamp. The bartender backed away from him.

He carried the lamp to the pile of table and chairs, broke it with a quick smash and let the kerosene spill over the pile. He reached into his pocket and brought out a match.

Devlin bleated, "Wait—let me get my things out!"

"The land on which this place stands is mine," Welker said. "I've got the best right in the world to it. The house my father built stood right here. I burned it—ten years ago." He pointed to the rear. "That grave out there—my mother's buried in it."

"How could I know?" Devlin burst out. His wild eyes caught sight of the blanket-covered body of Hutch Thompson. "You can't leave him there."

"It's better than a grave," Welker said. He stooped, struck the match and dropped it on the kerosene-covered wood. Flames licked out, raced over the tables and chairs and in a moment were roaring up.

Welker walked out of the saloon.

He was untying his horse from the hitchrail when the bartender burst out. He was followed by the cowboys and finally by Joe Devlin clutching a tin cashbox to his chest.

25

A cowboy on a lathered horse bounced to the ground in front of the H-B ranch house where Ellen Bayliss sat talking to her uncle.

"Thompson's been killed in town," the cowboy cried. "Hutch Thompson's dead."

"Oh, no!" wailed Ellen Bayliss.

"I was in the saloon when it happened," the cowboy continued. "He came in and yelled that Alf Norton had killed his daughter. He went for his gun, but Norton beat him to the draw——"

"The fool," exclaimed Arthur Bayliss.

"I should have stopped him," said Ellen poignantly. "He asked me if he could go in town and I—I let him. I should have prevented him from going. He—he'd told me about Linda." A shudder ran through her. "What did he mean his —his daughter had been killed by Norton?"

"I dunno," the cowboy said. "I left right after the shooting. So did Alf Norton," he added in satisfaction. "On'y he went by the back door. Funny part of it, he tried to pick a fight with that stranger who knocked him down last night and when the fella called his bluff, Norton backed down——"

"What stranger?" asked Bayliss.

"Fella who calls himself Smith. Maybe that's his name and maybe it ain't." He started to turn away, but Bayliss strode toward him.

"Wait—this man—what does he look like?"

"Why, he's the fellow was out here this morning."

"Here?"

"Oh, that's right, you weren't here."

Bayliss whirled on his niece. "Did you see him, Ellen?"

"Yes. I—I talked to him."

"Who is he?"

"You don't know him. He's a man who—who worked for Father on the railroad."

"What's his name?" shouted Arthur Bayliss. In a frenzy he grabbed Ellen's arm and shook her.

She cried out, "You're hurting me!"

"You're trying to lie to me. It's Welker, isn't it? Johnny Welker!"

His niece's face gave him the answer. Then Bayliss was running toward the office, some fifty or sixty yards from the house. "Haskins!" he shouted as he ran. "Ben—quick!"

Ben and Charlie Haskins stepped out of the office. "What's up?" Ben Haskins asked.

"Welker's here!" cried Bayliss. "He's here."

Ben Haskins' hand dropped to the butt of his gun. "Where?" His eyes darted around.

Bayliss pounded up. "He's in Buffalo Crossing, but he was here on the ranch this morning. I just found out."

"Johnny Welker!" exclaimed Charlie Haskins. "That's the man I was telling you about, Cousin Ben. He called himself Smith, but——"

"Sure," said Ben Haskins, nodding. "Smith!" He laughed shortly. "Well, Harry, it's been nice seeing you. Too bad we couldn't have a longer visit."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"California, where I came from."

"You think he won't follow you there? How fast do you think you can run? How far do you think you can go? Once Welker gets on your trail, he'll follow you to hell."

"Look," said Ben Haskins, "taking care of a man named Johnson is one thing. He isn't Johnny Welker."

Bayliss shook his head. "It's too late, Ben. Maybe Welker doesn't know yet that you're here, but he'll know it soon. And *then* you'll have to face him—alone."

Haskins growled. "You're pretty brave all of a sudden."

"We can't become panicky now. We—we're in this together. Welker's only one man, but there's you and me and—and Norton. Norton's got some gun fighters at his place."

A gleam came into Haskins' eyes. He nodded slowly. "A bunch of us. Uh-huh, this is our chance. We go for him with a crowd. That's a lot better than facing him alone." He looked suspiciously at Bayliss. "Where'll *you* be when we call him down?"

"With you."

"With me—or behind me a mile or two?"

Bayliss grimaced. "I can fight when I have to fight."

"Then let's get moving. Maybe we can catch him by surprise." Ben Haskins turned to his relative, Charlie Haskins. "You want to deal yourself into this, Charlie?"

"After the way he talked to me this morning?" Charlie Haskins growled. "You couldn't keep me away!"

The three men turned to the corral where they encountered Ellen Bayliss who was waiting for horses to be saddled to the buckboard.

"Where are you going, Ellen?" Bayliss demanded.

"To town."

"You stay here!"

"Now wait a minute, Uncle Arthur——" Ellen began.

Arthur Bayliss cut her off. "I said, stay here! I mean that!"

He strode past her, into the corral. Ellen, her forehead creased in worry, moved to one side. She remained there until her uncle and the two Haskinses rode out of the corral. Then she summoned one of the cowboys. "Hitch up the buckboard!"

"But your uncle said——"

"*I* pay you your wages," Ellen snapped.

"Yes, ma'am!" said the cowboy.

Five minutes later Ellen was seated in the bouncing buckboard, tearing down the road as fast as the two horses could gallop. She drove for two or three miles until she reached the crossroad, then suddenly became aware of a cloud of dust

ahead. She pulled in her team, not wanting to catch up to her uncle, but then noticed that there was only one rider ahead.

She whipped up the horses and they again began galloping. Swiftly she overtook the rider who was jogging along at a swift pace, but not a full gallop.

It turned out to be Cliff Johnson. He looked over his shoulder as she came up, then exclaiming, pulled his horse to the side of the road.

"Ellen!" he cried as she pulled up the horses in a swirl of dust.

"You've heard about Hutch Thompson?"

He nodded. "I'm on the way to town now." He shook his head. "Poor Ethel."

"I know," Ellen said. "I'm going to bring them back to the ranch."

"Them? Don't you know about Linda—she's dead, too. Killed herself."

Ellen cried out in dismay. "I heard about Hutch—that Norton had killed him."

"That's what brought it on. Linda killed herself, then Hutch went after Norton." He exclaimed suddenly, "What's that smoke up ahead?"

"It's in Buffalo Crossing. A fire."

"A big one," said Cliff Johnson.

The entire population of Buffalo Crossing watched the fire, but no one made any move toward extinguishing it. When the flames started to lick the adjoining building, a few buckets of water were tossed on it to wet it down, but since there was twenty feet or so between the two buildings, and it was a windless day, the saloon burned down without damaging the neighboring building beyond a little scorching.

Johnny Welker stood in the open doorway of Ethel Thompson's restaurant. He leaned against the doorjamb and now and then looked toward the fire.

Across the street were a dozen people. They watched the fire and now and then they watched Johnny Welker.

The last wall collapsed inward and Johnny Welker finally left the doorway of the restaurant and moved out to his horse at the rail.

He stopped before he reached the hitchrail. A trio of riders came galloping down the street from the south end of town. They pulled up their horses as they neared. In the center was Alf Norton. He was still some hundred feet away when he caught sight of Johnny Welker.

Alf pulled his horse to a complete stop. "There he is!" he said to the two men with him.

Joe Devlin ran out from the open door of a store building, where he had taken refuge shortly after Johnny Welker had fired his saloon.

"Wait a minute, Alf!" he cried. "That's Johnny Welker."

Norton recoiled. "Welker? How do you know?"

"He said so. And look—the way he's wearing his gun now. That's Welker's trademark. Everybody knows it."

"I don't want any part of Johnny Welker," said one of the riders with Alf Norton. "Count me out."

"You've taken my money and now you're running out," Norton accused.

"A hundred a month ain't enough to face Johnny Welker," growled the second rider. "Besides, you had your chance at him this morning." He suddenly shivered. "That was a close call."

"You're fired," snapped Norton.

"I quit," retorted the cowboy. He turned his horse and drove it away. The other cowboy followed him.

"Get a crew, Alf," pleaded Devlin. "Bring in a big enough bunch and get him."

Down the street came the clatter of hoofs. Norton looked over his shoulder. "Bayliss!" he exclaimed. He turned his horse. "Now we'll see."

He rode swiftly to meet Bayliss and the two Haskins men. Devlin saw them talking and gesticulating, then shot a quick look back and across the street. Johnny Welker was watching the quartet in the middle of the street, some hundred feet away.

Devlin darted back into the store.

"We're four to one," Alf Norton was saying to the others. "If we separate and come from different directions——"

"That's out," snapped Ben Haskins. "I'm not going to walk into his gun and then find out that the rest of you have disappeared. We go together or——"

"Ben's right," Arthur Bayliss said, surprisingly. "We've got to face him together. Then, if one of us gets—gets shot, the others will get him."

None of them seemed too pleased at the prospect, but all knew that it was the only way to go against Johnny Welker.

Ben Haskins started to dismount and Norton protested again. "*I'll* stay on my horse."

"So you can run out?" sneered Ben Haskins.

"You can't talk to me like that," Norton said savagely. "Just who do you think you are?"

"The name's Ben Haskins. I've had a ten-year appointment with Johnny Welker." He looked at Arthur Bayliss. "Me and Harry Shaw both."

"Harry Shaw?"

"Let's get on with it," Bayliss said testily. He dismounted, drawing his revolver as he got down from the horse.

A single horseman came swiftly into the town from the south. He was still some distance away, but as Norton, the last of the four, dismounted, the horseman came into recognizing distance. It was Cliff Johnson. A quarter of a mile behind him came the buckboard driven by Ellen Bayliss. But the four men in the street had eyes only for Johnson.

Bayliss's eyes lit up. "Cliff Johnson, Ben. Remember?"

Haskins suddenly chuckled. "Two birds at one time, eh?" He waved to the approaching horseman. "Hey, Johnson—come here!"

But Cliff Johnson swerved his horse and cut across the street. Haskins raised his revolver, took swift aim and fired. Johnson, who had started to dismount, gasped and fell to the ground. But he got up quickly and ran, bent low, toward Johnny Welker. Haskins sent another bullet after him, but it missed and whacked into the front of a building.

Welker, who had watched the distant conference in the street, began to walk forward. Johnson, still fifty feet away, cried out, "Welker—they're after you!"

Welker stopped and waited for Johnson to come up. The rancher had been hit by Haskins' first bullet, but it was merely a flesh wound in his left arm. The arm hung limp at his side, but Johnson could still use his right hand in which he gripped a revolver.

The others were coming forward now, in a solid clump. But after a short distance, they began to spread out—Arthur Bayliss on the far side—and lagging a few feet.

They were a hundred yards away when Welker suddenly became alert. His eyes were on the closest man—Ben Haskins. There was something familiar about him . . . something . . .

He drew a sharp breath.

"Haskins!" he said softly.

Johnson had reached Welker. "Norton and Bayliss."

"Bayliss? Why should he——?"

Then Welker's eyes went to the last man on the left, the one who was moving the slowest. He kept his eyes on him for a full moment, then a ripple of muscle swelled his jaws.

"Harry Shaw! Haskins and Shaw both!" He suddenly ducked under the hitchrail and moved out into the street.

"Haskins!" he cried. "Harry Shaw!"

"All right, Welker," Haskins called back. "You've been looking for us a long time. We're here."

The distance between them was gradually decreasing. Haskins had his gun in his hand, as did the others with him. Welker's was still stuck under the waistband of his trousers.

But the distance was still far for accurate revolver shooting and Haskins was holding his fire.

Ninety yards.

Welker's hands hung loosely at his side. "Haskins," he called, "make your play."

Haskins shot a quick look to the left and saw that he had distanced his allies. He stopped to wait for them to come up.

Then Welker drew his gun. The fast draw was not too important now, but he had it. The gun appeared in his hand more swiftly than it ever had since he had begun practicing ten long years before. One instant the muzzle was deep inside his waistband. The next it was pointed out—and belching death!

The first bullet hit Haskins high in the chest. He ran forward a step or two and collapsed to his knees. His gun went off, but the bullet went wild. Welker's second bullet caught him in the forehead.

Charlie Haskins got in a fast shot, cried out hoarsely and started to turn away. Welker dropped him with a bullet in the stomach. The distance was far for Alf Norton, but the firing had started and he could not advance—or retreat. He thumbed his gun as fast as he could, pulled back the hammer, pulled the trigger, pulled back a second time and then he died from a bullet through the heart.

Bayliss had fired twice by then and his second desperate bullet seared through Welker's right thigh, throwing him off balance as he turned his gun on Bayliss. The bullet went wild.

Bayliss cried out in triumph as he saw Welker stagger. "I've got you," he chortled. "I've got you." He ran forward, shooting as he ran. A bullet kicked up dirt in front of Welker, ricocheted and ploughed into his leg. Bayliss began to fall.

And then, Cliff Johnson, taking careful aim, fired at Bayliss. The gun fell from Bayliss's hand and an astonished look spread over his face.

He reeled, saw the white face of Ellen Bayliss as she pulled up her buckboard only yards away, then pitched to the street on his face.

26

There was a veterinarian in town who had had much practice in binding up human wounds, and he dug the one bullet out of Welker's thigh and put some splints on the leg and wrapped yards of bandage about it.

"You won't walk," he said when he finished. "But you won't bleed to death, and I imagine they can take you into North Platte in a wagon, where Doc Simmons can fix you up proper."

"No," said Ellen Bayliss. "We'll take him out to the ranch and I'll send for Dr. Simmons."

"North Platte's all right," Welker said.

Ellen caught the veterinarian's eye and the man nodded and went out of the store into which Welker had been carried. Ellen moved up to the counter on which Welker sat, his bandaged leg stuck out diagonally before him.

"You can go to North Platte," she said. "And then—after you're well, what then?"

He looked at her steadily. "I'll ride on."

"Where? Where'll you ride? Is there someplace you haven't seen? Is there—anything else you've got to do?"

There was no answer, of course.

Ellen said soberly, "I just came from Ethel Thompson. She told me—what you said to her. That nothing—meant anything to you. I knew that—years ago. Dad told me—that you lived only for—revenge. He said you were dedicated."

"It's over," Welker said irritably.

"Is it? But you want to ride on."

"What else can I do? I don't know anything else." He looked down the counter, saw his Navy gun several feet away. He tried to reach it, but found it too far away.

Ellen walked over and picked up the gun. She tendered it to Welker, butt first. "Your gun," she said. "How many men has it killed? What did that magazine article say? . . . No, that was eight years ago. The figure's more by now."

He hurled the gun through the open shop door. It landed in the dust of the street.

Ellen looked through the door, then turned back to face Welker.

A fine film of perspiration had appeared on his face. "That part of it's over," he said dully. "I'll never touch a gun again."

"But you'll still ride on," she persisted.

"What else can a man do?" he cried. "What's there for me? I'm a gun fighter without a gun. I don't know anything else."

"I've got a ranch," Ellen said.

"You've got a man to run it. Johnson."

"Cliff?" Ellen shook her head. "He's with Ethel Thompson. Which is right. She needs him." Her eyes bored into Welker's. "Do you remember that time in Cheyenne when you were in the company hospital?"

"You were a child then," he said bluntly.

"Yes, and my father sent me off to California afterwards so I—I wouldn't fall in love with you when I grew older. But in California, I didn't hear much of the bad about Johnny Welker. I—I only *thought* of the good."

"No," said Welker.

"All right," said Ellen. She went to the door. "I'll have the buckboard brought over and we'll drive you to North Platte. They've got a hospital there and you can lie there quietly and get better. And think. . . ."

She went to the door, but there she turned. "From the ranch it's only ten miles to North Platte. I—I can ride over to see you." She paused. "If you want me to. Do you?"

He exhaled wearily. "How could I stop you?"

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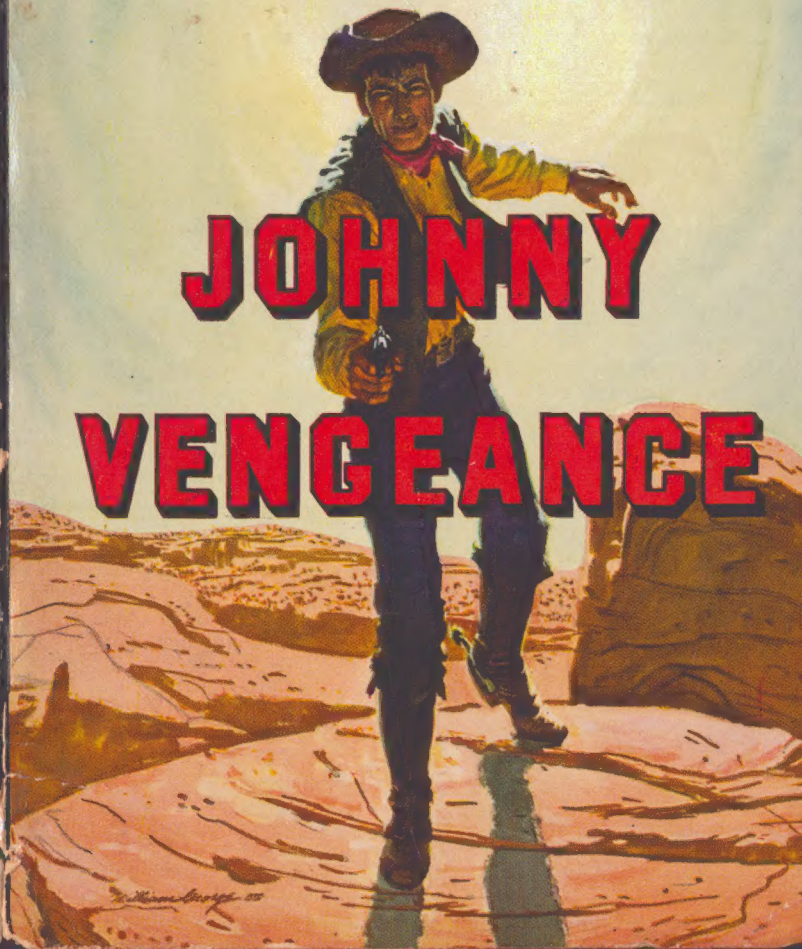

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